Boundaries of Darkness

The Complexities of Gamemastering Challenging Content in *Vampire* Tabletop Role-Playing Games

Mirka Oinonen
MA in New Media: Game Design and Production
Aalto University, 2020
Espoo, Finland
Supervisor: Miikka Junnila
Advisor: J. Tuomas Harviainen

Author Mirka Oinonen

Title of thesis Boundaries of Darkness. The Complexities of Gamemastering Challenging Content in Vampire Tabletop Role-Playing Games

Department Aalto University, Department of Media

Degree programme MA in New Media – Game Design and Production

Year 2020 **Number of pages** 88 **Language** English

Abstract

Many tabletop RPG players believe that gamemasters – the persons controlling the storyworld of a role-playing game – have a huge amount of responsibility on handling the issues rising within the communities and the problems coming up during play. What are the types of problems that gamemasters face while running games? How do they handle these problems when they do arise? This research set out to answer these questions by applying thematic analysis on a data set collected from 41 *Vampire* TRPG gamemasters with an online questionnaire.

The results show that there are many types of problems that a gamemaster can face while running their game, including differences in creative agendas; difficult social dynamics; problems in power sharing and problems with bleed – the crossover between character and player. It is also presented that gamemasters use multiple tactics to ensure a safer and more enjoyable game for all participants. These included *calibrations*, which could be related to the exogenous, endogenous or diegetic frames of the game; *directing*, which focused on the the diegetic frame of the game and *aftercare*, which was used to prevent problems in social dynamics after the game, and to facilitate the changing of frames between game and "real life."

I argue that while gamemasters do have a rather comprehensive understanding of safety, consent and boundary setting, a deeper understanding on the cultural issues affecting the gendered nature of power, emotions and bleed is required, as well as studies on the experiences of players. I also point out that there is indeed a small minority of tabletop gamers that still appear to feel threatened by safety mechanics and by studies such as this.

Keywords tabletop role-play, gamemaster, play practices, safety, bleed, taboo game subjects, power, Vampire

Tekijä Mirka Oinonen

Työn nimi Rajoja pimeydelle. Pelinjohtamisen ja haasteellisten pelisisältöjen monimuotoisuus Vampire-pöytäroolipeleissä

Laitos Aalto Yliopisto, Median laitos

Koulutusohjelma MA New Media, Game Design and Production

Vuosi 2020 **Sivumäärä** 88 **Kieli** Englanti

Tiivistelmä

Monet pöytäroolipelaajat ajattelevat, että pelinjohtajalla – sillä henkilöllä, joka kontrolloi roolipelin tarinaa ja maailmaa – on valtava vastuu ongelmien ratkaisemisessa sekä yhteisöjen sisällä että pelin aikana. Millaisia ongelmia pelinjohtajat siis kohtaavat vetäessään peliä? Kuinka he hoitavat kohtaamansa ongelmat? Tämä tutkimus pyrkii vastaamaan näihin kysymyksiin soveltamalla temaattista analyysia aineistoon, joka kerättiin 41 *Vampire*-pöytäroolipelin pelinjohtajalta käyttäen internetin välityksellä jaettua kyselylomaketta.

Tulokset osoittavat, että pelinjohtajat kohtaavat monen tyyppisiä ongelmia peliä johtaessaan. Näitä ongelmia ovat muunmuassa eroavaisuudet luovissa agendoissa, vaikeat sosiaaliset dynamiikat, vallanjaon ongelmat sekä bleedin – hahmon ja pelaajan välisen sekoittumisen – aiheuttamat vaikeudet. Tutkimus osoittaa myös, että pelinjohtajat soveltavat monenlaisia tekniikoita varmistaakseen turvallisemman ja miellyttävämmän pelikokemuksen kaikille osallistujille. Näitä ovat *kalibraatiot*, jotka voivat liittyä joko pelin eksogeeniseen, endogeeniseen tai diegeettiseen kehykseen; ohjaaminen, joka keskittyi pelin diegeettiseen kehykseen, sekä jälkihuolto, jonka avulla pyrittiin estämään ongelmallisten sosiaalisten dynamiikkojen syntymistä pelin jälkeen, sekä fasilitoimaan prosessia, jossa pelaaja siirtyy kehyksestä toiseen pelin ja “oikean elämän” välillä.

Tutkimus osoittaa, että vaikka pelinjohtajilla on kohtalaisen kattava ymmärrys turvallisuudesta, suostumuksesta ja rajojen asettamisesta, on silti tärkeää pyrkiä paremmin ymmärtämään niitä kulttuurisidonnaisia ilmiöitä, jotka vaikuttavat vallankäytön, tunteiden ja bleedin havaittuun sukupuolittuneeseen luonteeseen. Samoin on tärkeää saada lisää tutkimustietoa itse pelaajien kokemuksista. Tutkimus osoittaa myös, että pöytäroolipelajista löytyy yhä pieni vähemmistö, joka vaikuttaa kokevan sekä puheet turvallisuudesta, että tämän kaltaiset tutkimukset, jollain tapaa uhaksi omalle harrastukselleen.

Avainsanat pöytäroolipeli, pelinjohtaja, pelikäytännöt, turvallisuus, bleed, tabut peliaiheet, valta, Vampire

Acknowledgements

I want to thank my advisor, J. Tuomas Harviainen, for being the support I very much needed to get this done. Your advice and encouragement kept me going. I also want to thank my supervisor Miikka Junnila, and everyone on our thesis seminar, especially Markku Reunanen for running it even through the sudden pandemic. Special thanks to Sinipetra Paatola for sharing your thoughts on researching *Vampire*-games, and to all the people who proof-read and commented the text at different parts of this process – Janina, Reni and Linn. Your feedback was helpful every single time!

I also want to thank my loving partner Jaakko for giving me feedback, encouragement and ideas. Getting to discuss the wonders of role-playing and *Vampire* with you was a big help.

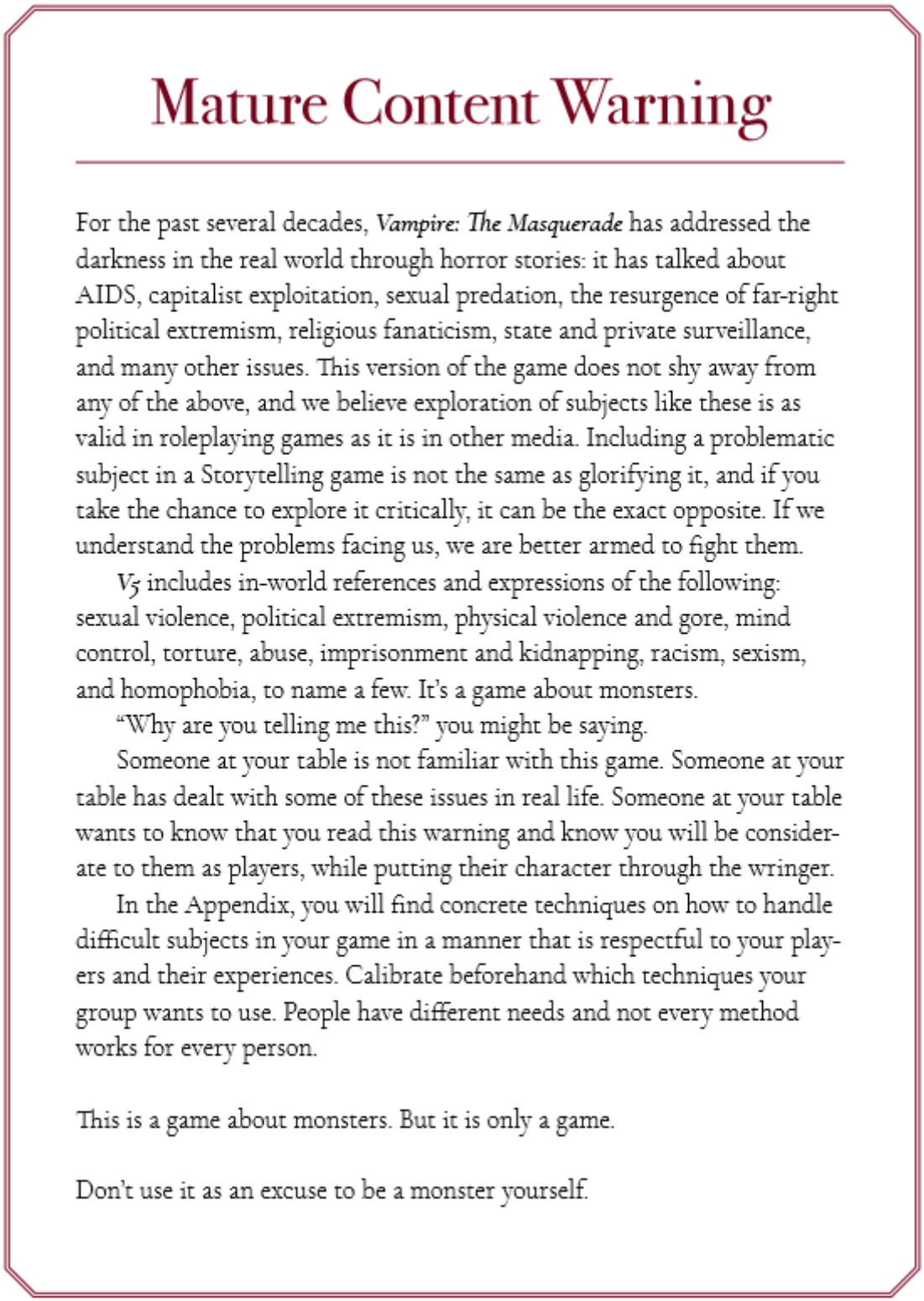
Especially, I want to thank my dear *Vampire: The Masquerade* playgroup, as I have experienced so much with you. Without all of our games together, I would never have felt so deeply about a tabletop RPG, and this thesis would never have happened. May we roll many more hunger dice together, and hopefully not rip each other apart in a frenzy anytime too soon.

And lastly, but most importantly, I want to thank all the amazing gamemasters who took the time to fill in my questionnaire, and provided me with amazing, rich stories of their hobby. I hope I get to one day play with you, and I hope that you can get something out of this paper as well – I know I sure learnt a lot from all of you.

Thank you.

Figure 1

The first page of the pdf version of the 5th edition of Vampire: The Masquerade, published in 2018



Mature Content Warning

For the past several decades, *Vampire: The Masquerade* has addressed the darkness in the real world through horror stories: it has talked about AIDS, capitalist exploitation, sexual predation, the resurgence of far-right political extremism, religious fanaticism, state and private surveillance, and many other issues. This version of the game does not shy away from any of the above, and we believe exploration of subjects like these is as valid in roleplaying games as it is in other media. Including a problematic subject in a Storytelling game is not the same as glorifying it, and if you take the chance to explore it critically, it can be the exact opposite. If we understand the problems facing us, we are better armed to fight them.

V5 includes in-world references and expressions of the following: sexual violence, political extremism, physical violence and gore, mind control, torture, abuse, imprisonment and kidnapping, racism, sexism, and homophobia, to name a few. It's a game about monsters.

"Why are you telling me this?" you might be saying.

Someone at your table is not familiar with this game. Someone at your table has dealt with some of these issues in real life. Someone at your table wants to know that you read this warning and know you will be considerate to them as players, while putting their character through the wringer.

In the Appendix, you will find concrete techniques on how to handle difficult subjects in your game in a manner that is respectful to your players and their experiences. Calibrate beforehand which techniques your group wants to use. People have different needs and not every method works for every person.

This is a game about monsters. But it is only a game.

Don't use it as an excuse to be a monster yourself.

Preface

It is the spring of 2019 when a friend of mine decides to revive the *Vampire: The Masquerade* campaign we started almost 10 years ago. I join in with my old character, Markus, who I have a very deep emotional bond with. We play many sessions during the spring and summer, introducing the campaign to new players, and diving deep into the story our gamemaster has created, all while learning the mechanics of the newly published V5.

One very critical aspect of my character is that he has a *deeply* unhealthy obsession with a girl, one of the NPCs of the campaign. I tell my GM how much I love this dynamic and let them know how much I enjoy playing gut wrenching tragedies - basically asking for the situation to turn more intense. I get what I ask for, as the relationship soon spirals into torture, sexual abuse, power play and domination, revealing parts of these characters that makes us all kind of uncomfortable. After an especially powerful session I suddenly feel physically shaky. On my way home I listen to the theme song the GM has played during the dreadful scene, and tears fill my eyes. My stomach feels like it just fell through the bus floor, and my heart aches. I feel like throwing up.

"It was a great session", I tell my GM through WhatsApp. "But I think I need to de-escalate that relationship a bit. I'm getting, like, the strongest bleed[1] I've ever had. Could we play the aftermath of that scene at some point, so I get a bit of closure before the next big session?" They agree, and I'm glad we share a vocabulary; I don't need to justify my feelings or explain why I think this is important. The closure session is powerful and sad, but much needed. All this leaves me wondering: am I the only one? I often play *for* bleed, and in LARPs I've experienced it many times, but never before has this happened in a tabletop RPG. And while I am safe in this group, and I know my experiences will be handled with love and caring with the GM of the campaign, I wonder how it would be in another group, with another gamemaster?

The idea for my thesis is born.

[1] the feeling of a character spilling over to one's own persona. See more from 2.3.1

Glossary

TRPG – tabletop role-playing game

RPG – role-playing game

LARP – live action role-playing game

NPC – non-player character; a character played by the gamemaster

PC – player character; a character played by a player

GM – gamemaster

DM – dungeon master; the *Dungeons & Dragons* books' term for a gamemaster

Storyteller – the *Vampire* books' term for a gamemaster

WoD – World of Darkness

VtM – Vampire: The Masquerade

D&D – Dungeons and Dragons, the world's most popular tabletop role-playing game

Party – a group of characters that the players play in a game

In-game – things happening within the fiction of a role-playing game

Off-game/out-of-game – things happening during playing but out of the fiction of a role-playing game

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1 INTRODUCTION

Many players believe that the enjoyment, safety and comfort of players in role-playing games rests hugely on the shoulders of the gamemasters (Bowman, 2013). While games are a group effort, a gamemaster holds great power in deciding what is acceptable around the table, and how different situations should be handled within the group. Both the in-game events – the things that happen within a game, like the laws of a fictional kingdom or the plot of an adventure – and off-game things, like time management or appropriate player behaviour, are usually greatly influenced by the participant who takes on the role of a GM. However, the skills or methods for taking on this responsibility are not easily taught in TRPG rulebooks, and so gamemasters have to come up with their own ways of dealing with the task. In this thesis, I study gamemasters' experiences of problematic situations, as well as their practices on boundary setting, game preparations and experience management, focusing especially on challenging or negative experiences. My data consists of answers to an online questionnaire, and my focus is narrowed down to gamemasters running Vampire tabletop role-playing games.

In their research on social conflicts in role-playing communities, Bowman (2013) presents many possible causes for schisms within these communities, including long-term immersion, campaign-style play, differences in play-culture, bleed and unfair uses of gamemaster's power. Within the LARP community, player safety has been discussed in great detail (see e.g Algayres, 2019; Burns, 2014; Niskanen, n.d.; Webb, 2018). The tabletop community is slowly starting to catch up as well, with discussions about harassment, sexism and triggering gameplay taking place in social media such as blogs and YouTube (see e.g Clark, 2019; Noppatuuri, 2019; Vecchione, 2018). Suomen Roolipeliseura[2] is also publishing a report on negative player experiences in TRPGs. Most of this discussion is, understandably, focusing on the experiences of players. In order to bring a new point of view to the table, I decided early on that the focus of this research would be in the practices of gamemasters. Therefore, my research questions lie in the ways that gamemasters handle difficult situations and themes. What are the types of problems that gamemasters face while running games? How do they handle these problems when they do arise?

[2] Suomen Roolipeliseura , "The Finnish Role-Play Society". https://suomenroolipeliseura.fi/

This research thesis consists of six parts. The following part, chapter 2, will discuss the most notable theory around tabletop RPGs, guide the reader into the topics relevant to gamemastering, and present a brief history of problems within the tabletop role-playing games. The focus of this is on the problematic parts of the hobby, as well as the theories that center on safety and boundaries. After introducing the context and the theoretical background, I will describe my methodological approach and data in chapter 3, as well as explain my point of view as a queer gamer. The analysis is formed in chapters 4 and 5, starting from a more descriptive breakdown of the themes identified in the data set and continuing with a more interpretive analysis, which strives to contextualize this research on the wider field of game research. The closing chapter points the reader forward with ideas on further studies. Information about the data can be found from appendices at the very end of the paper.

2 THE CULTURE OF ROLEPLAYING

During recent years, tabletop role-playing games have slowly been accepted as a valid and even a powerful hobby. Role-playing games have become an important part of game studies, and researchers from pedagogical fields are studying their possible uses in education (e.g. Kaylor, 2017; Ntokos, 2019). According to *Pelaajabarometri 2018* (Kinnunen et al., 2018) around 3,9% of Finns play role-playing games. The public image has shifted far from the panic of the 80s and 90s, when tabletop role-playing games were claimed to cause satanism (Linja-aho, 2018). In short, tabletop RPGs are not just a tiny niche anymore, and are mostly seen as positive within popular media and academia alike. However, while positive representations of role-players have been important in the mission of clearing misconceptions about the hobby, the possible problems within the subculture need to be addressed as well.

This part of the thesis will present the most important research on tabletop role-playing games, studies on other sorts of role-playing games, and the theory which the research has been built upon. The focus is heavily on safety, boundaries and inclusion, as well as discrimination and other problems present in the culture.

2.1 What are tabletop role-playing games?

Tabletop role-playing games or TRPGs – sometimes also referred to as "pen and paper games" – are a subcategory of role-playing games or RPGs. This chapter aims to shed light on the definitions of RPGs and TRPGs, while noting that coming up with a perfect definition is challenging, given the diversity of the form.

The name of the hobby, as Brunette (2015, p.13) notes, already gives us the impression of a game that is played around a table, using pens and papers, while impersonating roles. They also point out two flaws of this simple categorization. Firstly, many TRPGs are indeed played through chats, forums or video calls, and do not include a table, pens or papers. Secondly, there are many games that technically fit this description, but that are not TRPGs in the way that we understand: a game of *Monopoly* is played around a table, with pens and papers, while taking on the roles of capitalist, but isn't exactly role-playing.

Focusing more on the act of play rather than the physical play objects or environment, Fine's (1983) definition still faces similar problems. In his ethnography on the players of *Dungeons and Dragons*, he defines tabletop role-playing games as "any game which allows a number of

players to assume the roles of imaginary characters and operate with some degree of freedom in an imaginary environment" (p. 6). The fuzziness of this category leaves the reader with many questions; what can be counted as imaginary characters or a proper amount of freedom for this definition to hold true? Children playing make-believe falls under the definition perfectly – but like Monopoly, seeing it as a TRPG seems counter-intuitive.

Daniel Mackay's (2001, pp. 4-5) definition brings in the performative aspect of TRPGs, as well as the presence of a gamemaster, stating that TRPGs are "an *episodic* and *participatory* storycreation *system* that includes a set of quantified *rules* that assist a group of *players* and a *gamemaster* in determining how their fictional *characters'* spontaneous interactions are resolved" (original emphasis). Williams et al. (2006) narrow the definition even more, stating that

> [a] basic RPG. . .is one where several people (two or more) come together, usually for several hours . . . One person is designated to be in charge of the story and is typically given a specific title . . . This person is responsible for all aspects of the game (setting and system) except the actions of the *players*. The players create fictional personas called *characters*, within the rules and genre specified by the game, and then collectively engage in protracted storytelling. . . . there are never really "winners" or "endings" in RPGs. Rather, the players are interested in experiencing a good story, but also improving their characters' strengths and diminishing their weaknesses, thereby allowing them to experience grander and more epic stories. (Williams et al., 2006, pp. 3-4)

While this definition paints a clear and understandable picture of what TRPGs are, and cuts out many of the games we do not see belonging to the category, it also offers a very narrow understanding of what TRPGs can be. There are TRPGs with multiple gamemasters, and games without a gamemaster at all. In addition, the goals of a TRPG can be more varied than experiencing a good story or improving the characters. Brunette, acknowledging many of these shortcomings, proposes TRPGs to be "any collaborative and participatory story creation game/game system which enables a group of players and a referee(s) to interact with an imaginary environment" (Brunette, 2015, p.15). This definition avoids the fallbacks of requiring a single gamemaster, episodic gameplay, or specific creative goals, but again gives room for many games that we might not see as TRPGs. The problem for defining tabletop role-playing, then, seems to always face one of two opposite problems; either it is too strict,

leaving out the multiple realities of game cultures that exist; or it is too wide, not setting the form apart from other games that use roles as a part of the game-play.

Given the diversity of definitions, it is possible that the gamemaster studied in this research may have differing views on what TRPGs are. However, as they all have run versions of *Vampire* games, I can assume that their games follow the basic premises of having players and a gamemaster. As in many other TRPG rulebooks, *Vampire* core rule books start by giving a brief introduction to tabletop role-playing. The newest edition of *Vampire: The Masquerade* (Modiphius Entertainment, 2018) describes role-playing as follows:

> In roleplaying games, players tell or act out the stories for an audience of themselves, guided by the rules or logic of the game, but limited only by their imagination. . . .As a player of Vampire, you take on the persona and role of a character that you create, and you then pretend to be that character during the course of the story. One of the participants, the Storyteller, creates and guides the story. They build the setting and populate it with a supporting cast of Storyteller-played characters (SPCs). The Storyteller describes what happens in the world as a result of what the players say and do. It is the Storyteller who arbitrates the rules and springs horrifying new challenges into the game. (Modiphius Entertainment, 2018, p. 40)

The most important definition in the light of this thesis is Montola's (2009) definition of RPGs, which categorizes role-playing games as formal make-believe restricted by three invisible rules. These rules, known as the *world rule*, the *power rule* and the *character rule*, set role-playing apart from other types of storytelling and games. The *world rule* states that role-playing is a process in which the participants interactively define and redefine the state and properties of an imaginary world. This means that even though the beginning of the game might be determined by an outer source, the actual state of the narrative is actively changed by all participants in a constant cooperative effort. The *power rule* states that definitional power – the power to define the world that was described in rule one – has to be shared amongst the participants. These power differences make acting within the gameworld feel more meaningful: if all participants were able to make any changes they wanted, the interactions would not have as much of an impact. To avoid unnecessary conflicts, it is important that all participants recognize the existence of these hierarchies and agree to act within their restrictions. Thirdly, the player-participants must use personified character constructs to utilize their definitional power within the game world. This character rule excludes any interactive storytelling games

that do not use characters as the basis of player-participant contribution. (Montola, 2009, pp.23-24).

The gameplay of TRPGs can take various forms. They may be played either as campaigns or one-shots: a one-shot is a game that is played during just one session, usually lasting around 3 to 5 hours. By contrast, a campaign is a series of games that have a shared narrative, which continues from play-session to play-session. These campaigns can last from a few weeks to years or even decades. TRPGs use rulesets, sometimes also referred to as systems (White et al., 2018), to define how the participants can act within the world and the game. These rules may vary for different participants, the most common differences being between the players and the GM. The players' rules could, for example, define the steps of creating a character and the rules for using that character within the fictional setting, while the GM's rules could specify the steps for creating NPC characters, the mechanics of allocating experience points to players, or a recommended way of preparing an adventure. On top of the rules, many TRPG rulebooks such as *Vampire: The Masquerade* also include a fictional background or setting to be used as a baseline for the narrative of the game. However, while the beginning state of the fictional world is given in the *Vampire* rulebooks, playing the game re-defines and clarifies the diegesis – things existing within the fiction – constantly. Players might not have read the books, perhaps due to lack of time, maybe because reading the material is only the GMs responsibility in that playgroup. Either way, keeping the fiction coherent demands constant effort from all participants.

2.1.1 The gamemaster

A classic tabletop RPG consists of two kinds of participant roles – the players and the gamemaster – who play the game by conversationally describing a fictional world (White et al., 2018), developing and iterating the existing narrative. Traditionally, the gamemaster and the player-participants, or simply players, play the game differently. While the players play by describing the actions of their characters, the gamemaster or the GM is responsible for describing the world, planning the overall plot and controlling the non-player characters or NPCs; characters that live within the shared fictional world but are not played by a player. The GM's role can also include experience design and facilitation of the playing process. There are also multiple TRPGs that do not have a GM (e.g. Starcrossed RPG[3]) at all, or that turn these

[3] https://bullypulpitgames.com/games/star-crossed/

dynamics on their head by having multiple GMs and only one player (e.g. Lännen Maat[4]). However, as *Vampire* games are described in the rulebooks to use a single GM or a Storyteller, these kinds of games will not be further examined in this thesis.

Manolya et al (2005) describe that the traditional understanding of a TRPG gamemaster is that of an all-powerful storyteller, with full control on both the rules and the gameworld, as well as with full responsibility to offer interesting content. This paradigm of the GM as the master of the game is perhaps most present in games with closer historical connections to wargaming, such as *D&D*. Garcia (2017, p. 242) also points out that rule interpreting was also a key element of the gamemaster's role in the early versions of *D&D*, which referred to the gamemaster as a "referee".

Assisted by the publication of games like *VtM*, attitudes towards the GM's role as a provider and editor, rather than the master or referee, started to become more widely accepted in the 1990's (Manolya et al., 2005). Dyszelski (2006, pp.10-11) compares the gamemaster to a director, and includes, for example, plot development, NPC design and rule adjudicating as their responsibilities. Strugnell et al (2018, p. 430) define gamemasters in RPGs as "moderators and storytellers of the gaming experience", stating that their task is "to describe the world that the players encounter and to arbitrate the players' actions". Manolya et al. (2005) defines tabletop gamemaster's role with four functions: being in charge of the narrative flow; enforcing and knowing the rules; entertaining and engaging the players and creating the fictional environment. All these definitions, while rather comprehensive in the storytelling and experience management, do not really pay much attention to the social parts of gamemastering.

Many tabletop RPG rulebooks also give an introduction to the role of a gamemaster. The fifth edition of *Vampire: The Masquerade* (Modiphius Entertainment, 2018) describes the role as follows:

> The Storyteller's primary duty is to make sure the other players have a good time. You do that by telling a good story. . . . You create the setting and set the plot in motion – and then let the players live it out in the roles of the primary characters, changing your story and your setting as they go. You must maintain a careful balance between narration and adjudication, between entertainer and umpire, between story and game.

[4] http://geekgirls.fi/wp/blog/2014/01/12/lannen-maat/

> Sometimes you set the scene or even describe the action, but mostly you decide what occurs in reaction to the words and actions of the characters, as fairly and impartially as you can. (Modiphius Entertainment, 2018, p.40)

As this description shows, the gamemaster in *Vampire* games is given a huge amount of power and responsibility in keeping the game entertaining for everyone. The books have referred to the GM as the "Storyteller" from the start, emphasizing the focus on the narrative instead of dice-rolling. However, the rules of *Vampire* games are quite heavy and structured, and the role of a Storyteller also includes adjudication of these rules.

If a TRPG uses a gamemaster, whether as a moderator, referee, storyteller or a master of the game, the person in that position almost inevitably holds great power over the style of play and the direction of the story. The GM also controls the level of possible connection to the campaign - it is within their power to stop gamemastering altogether, which will effectively cut off any player agency (Downey, 2015, pp. 80-81.)

Due to the authoritative role of a GM, the issue of gender is important to consider. While there is not yet much research on the effects of gender on gamemastering, there are many blog posts, articles and discussions around the issues of playing or gamemastering as a woman (e.g. Donovan, 2014; Juneau, 2015; Kane, 2018; Lorey, 2015.) It is, however, a known fact that men are still the majority when it comes to gamemastering. For example, an analysis made using 50 years worth of data from Gen Con[5] states that only between 20-30% of events in Gen Con are run by women (Best 50 Years in Gaming, n.d.) While this analysis has its flaws – for example, the gender of the GMs is deduced from their names, and no other genders outside men and women are taken into account – it does illustrate how the amount of women in the community has been steadily growing, but is still noticeably smaller than men. It also shows how the games are gendered by content: in historical miniature games, for example, only around 2,7% of the gamemasters were women, compared to the almost 70% in kids activities (Best 50 Years in Gaming, n.d.).

2.2 Gender, intimacy and queerness in TRPGs

Tabletop role-playing games' historical basis in wargaming, beginning from the birth of *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax & Arneson, 1974), has been pointed out in many studies on role-

[5] A game convention in the United States https://www.gencon.com/

playing (e.g Garcia, 2017; Williams et al., 2006). *Dungeons & Dragons* has since been a stepping- stone for the entire TRPG scene. For this reason, it is important to highlight some of the problems of the game, as those issues have affected the development of all role-playing games to this day.

Both the gameplay mechanics, and the emerging narratives of early D&D, revolved around combat, war and fighting (A. Brown & Stenros, 2018). Representations of gender were absent, and the actual playing of the game included many sexist practises: the games were, frankly, designed with male characters in mind (Fine, 1983). However, while sex, romance or gender were not part of the rules, sexual themes were a part of gameplay itself. For example Fine (1983) observed the use of sexual violence towards female NPCs in all-male playgroups, and noted that players felt ”constrained by the presence of women” as it made it harder to play out these fantasy rape-scenes. Nephew’s (2006) research stays on similar lines, stating that role-players act out their deeper desires by indulging in different sorts of problematic and sexist behaviours during play, describing her own uncomfortable experiences in such games as well as a literature review to support the claims. All this is to show that TRPGs have never existed outside the cultural discourses or power structures around issues such as gender and sexuality, and that the issues of safety and dark play must be considered even when the written content of a game does not include such themes.

In the 30 years since Fine’s and Nephew’s research, the hobby has certainly changed, though many issues still prevail. There are now hundreds, if not thousands, of commercial TRPGs besides *D&D*, more people playing, and more diverse systems to play with. Dyszelski’s (2006, p.105) research on women’s experiences in RPGs states that 71,5% of males and 68,7% of females feel that gaming has become “slightly” to “much less” sexist over the time they have been involved in it .

The first TRPG to really introduce social play was *Vampire: The Masquerade*, *White Wolf Publishing* company’s first tabletop RPG storytelling system, published in 1991, sparking more experimental and narrative based explorations of themes like sexuality (A. Brown & Stenros, 2018). Before *VtM*, the actual gameplay of most tabletop games had mostly concentrated on fighting, experience gaining and dungeon exploration, and even horror games like *Call of Cthulhu* (Petersen, 1981) were games about heroes fighting against monsters: *VtM* introduced a game where the player characters *were* the monsters, and the gameplay revolved around social issues, power and storytelling (Brunette, 2015, pp.5-6). The focus on drama and stories

was further underlined by the choice of using the word "storyteller" instead of "gamemaster". *Vampire: The Masquerade* even offered guidance on gamemastering the more intimate themes: seducing someone for mechanical purposes, like feeding on their blood, could be done using gamified social skills like "intimidation" and "charisma". Alternatively, if the feelings were sincere, romance and seduction could be approached narratively, without necessarily using dice-based mechanics at all, thus moving the hobby in a new, less rule-driven direction (Brown & Stenros, 2018). The focus of the game, overall, was more in the fictional setting, aesthetics and mood over the mechanics. Facing instant success, *VtM* and its different editions still continue to be one of the most played TRPGs (Appelcline, 2014).

As Dyszelski (2006, p.80-81) points out, *Vampire: The Masquerade*'s thematics also enabled players to engage with themes of sexuality, reproduction and lineage, while simultaneously keeping distance from the reality of those topics. *White Wolf* was also among the first companies to "take a stand on the use of gender pronouns", as their books incorporate the female pronoun instead of the male pronoun as default, making a disclaimer about this choice in the beginning of the books (Dyszelski, 2006, p.78).

It has been proposed that the focus on narrative and social play, combined with the more modern themes of the game, made the game more accessible for LGBTQI+ people and women (e.g. Dyszelski, 2006; Brown & Stenros, 2018). According to Brunette (2015) the vampire myth and literature faced a revitalization in the 80's. During this time, vampires were being presented as attractive, sympathetic and modern, instead of old and cloaked aristocrats, and the media started to surround them in discourses of "underground rock music, youthful rebellion, and most importantly overt, often queer, sexual liberation" (Brunette, 2015, pp. 43-45). However, vampires were simultaneously used as a demonizing metaphor of homosexuality and AIDS in the political discourse (Brunette, 2015, pp. 45-50). With all this, the vampire discourse is inherently tied to queer history, and as Brown and Stenros (2018) present, the *World of Darkness* offers a fictional setting perfect for exploring queerness, as any and all alternative cultures fit inside the narrative without issue.

Since the publishing of the first game, the series has received many add-ons and spinoffs and under the same *World of Darkness* world, such as *Werewolf: the Apocalypse* (White Wolf, 1992) and *Mage: the Ascension* (White Wolf, 1993). In 2004, *White Wolf* started publishing a new series of TRPGs, which later became known as the *New World of Darkness*, or *Chronicles of Darkness*. These books kept some of the elements from the earlier publications, but the

gameplay mechanics and storylines were changed. Books published under this new series were, for example, *Vampire: The Requiem* (White Wolf, 2004) and *Werewolf: The Forsaken* (White Wolf, 2005). In addition to the TRPG books, there have also been many other publications under both fictional settings, such as over thirty novels and multiple digital games (Appelcline, 2014). As in any production of this size, the creative processes and design values in the games are varied, and the overall mood and style of the games has changed many times since the 90s. The ownership of these systems has also undergone many changes, belonging at one point partly to Onyx Path Publishing and being purchased by *Paradox Interactive* in 2015. In 2018, following the Chechnya-scandal (Hall, 2018) *White Wolf* was fully integrated directly into *Paradox Interactive* (Jorjani, 2018). The thematic of blood, sexuality and personal horror have still been a part of the game through its history, and the visual style has included suggestive, grim and bloody images in all the game's editions, as seen in figures 2 and 3.

Figure 2

The front and back covers of the Tzimisce Clanbook (published in 1995). Images acquired from https://www.tsrarchive.com/

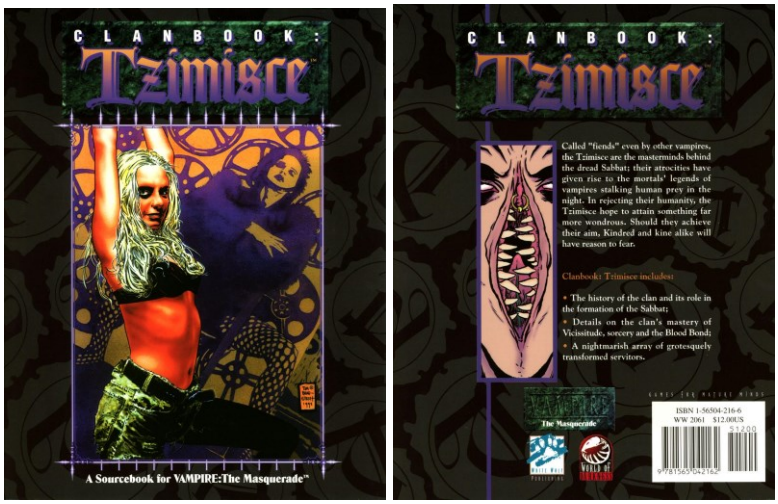

Figure 3

The front covers for Night Horrors: The Wicked Dead (published in 2009), The Beast that Haunts the Blood: Nosferatu (published in 2009), and Camarilla (published in 2018). Images acquired from https://whitewolf.fandom.com/

The discussions around the company or games themselves have not always been positive. After the *VtMs* initial release in 1991, it was described by the press as "the etiological of antisocial behaviour" (Simon, 1998). Moreover, when the newest edition of the game was published in 2018, the company faced harsh criticism of the way the book handled current political subjects (see e.g Gault, 2018). Despite the controversies, *Vampire: The Masquerade* and its add-ons it remains one of the most popular TRPGs in the world.

2.2.1 Toxicity in gamer culture

Playing games and being a gamer can be difficult for those who are not white, male, cis[6] and hetero. In his research, Dyszelski (2006) demonstrates that while game culture has certainly become more inclusive and welcoming to women, there is still a long way to go. He also points out that the social dynamics of real life are often recreated in games, groups and culture, despite the creative power of the media. Sexism in games is evident in many ways, including but not limited to the artwork in game books and the actual ways people are treated due to their gender (Dyszelski, 2006).

[6] cis-gender; a person who's gender identity matches the gender they were assigned with at birth

Research on toxic culture has been increasing on the side of video games. A report by Alin (2018) shows that within competitive online games, over half of gamers age 15-29 face hate speech, including racism, homophobia, negative comments about gender and sexuality and name-calling. While this report does *not* cover RPGs, and the amount of hate speech changes even between different online games, TRPGs can be seen as a part of a wider gamer- and geek-culture, and so the problems within one part of the culture may very well be present in other parts as well. It is also notable that up to 90% of the people studied in the report wished that hate speech would be intervened more often, and over 80% hoped that gamers would support each other more (Alin, 2018). This shows that the desire for change does exist.

The yet unpublished *Turvallisempaa pöytäroolipelaamista*[7] (Kyllönen et al., 2020) report, which collected the negative experiences of both players and GMs in TRPGs, can inform us more of the state of TRPGs in particular. The report states that the three most common uncomfortable situations in TRPGs are in-appropriate speech, mixing the line between character/player and disrespecting the player's authority on their character. Violations of physical integrity, and unwanted sexual/romantic attention between players were less common, but still received dozens of mentions. Sexual themes were seen as by far the riskiest in-game content. Reported in-game problems – things that happen within the context of the story and game – were the forcing of sexual game content; character relationships as an excuse to a player's disturbing behaviour; cruel interactions between characters; railroading, or characters not having possibilities to affect the story; using power in-game on the basis of off-game status; breaking the game contract, and deliberately shocking content. Reported off-game problems – things that happen outside the context of game – were players losing their temper; thinking that character equals player; limiting of play possibilities (e.g. not allowing to play a class due to gender); depreciating female players; discriminatory humor (e.g. trans-/homophobic) and disrupting use of intoxicants. As the report notes, separating these two levels is merely theoretical, and in reality, the layers affect each other. However, it can be useful to examine how problems are present in various levels of the playing process (Kyllönen et al., 2020).

This report illustrates that women and other minorities do face discrimination within the tabletop community, and that experiences about difficult situations are not always believed. It

[7] The "Safer Role-Playing" report

also brings up the fact that there are some people who deny or downplay the existence of such problems: according to the report, there were some cases where those who have faced uncomfortable situations were described as crazy or abnormal. Generally, however, the attitude towards safety was stated to be curious or positive, and the responses that downplayed the problem were only a small minority (Kyllönen et al., 2020).

As presented by these studies, toxicity and problematic behaviour are not absent from tabletop role-playing or the gaming community. The nature of games can sometimes make this behaviour easier: according to Downey (2015), while video-games can be a suitable environment for harassment due to their lack of physical interactions between players, tabletop RPGs can also offer a space of anonymity through roles, as the player can be removed from having to take responsibility through their performative persona (p. 10). This way, the frame of the game can effectively be used to for bullying, discrimination or harassment.

Reactions to discrimination are also varied. As Dyszelski (2006) points out, there exists the difficult choice of either remaining silent or speaking up and possibly "ruining" the game. For many, ignorance and tolerance are the primary responses to such situations, but even if an incident can sometimes be easily dismissed, other times they might have long-lasting negative effects (Dyszelski, 2006, p.124).

With these examples in mind, it becomes interesting to note how some people react to studies on the issues: even in this research, there were people who stated they were not aware of any problems existing, or thought the research was useless. And while incorporating any formal calibration mechanics described in the following chapters might not be useful to all individual play groups, ignorance of the whole *existence* of these problems is a different matter entirely.

2.3 Safer Play

> When you run a Vampire game, you'll want horrible things to feel horrible, but you also want your game to remain playable and accessible to your players. The limits of which horrors are too much are very individual, and these boundaries are something you want to talk about as a troupe before the game starts. . . . There's no easy trick to make horror always work for your players, but having an open discussion is a good way to start! (Modiphius Entertainment, 2018, p.36)

Stories are powerful but they can also cause harm. Re-living through a traumatic experience, even if it is "just" fiction, might trigger anxiety. A player might not feel comfortable telling the GM to stop, even if they feel their personal line has been crossed. What's more, inexperienced players will probably not know where their limits are to begin with, so working to keep the tone suitable for all participants is a constant effort. Therefore, understanding the power of roleplaying, the possible problems that could arise while playing, and the different ways to cope with them is necessary in order to keep the hobby safe and accessible (Bowman, 2013). No game can ever be absolutely safe - human interactions always contain certain risks - but as Stenros (2015) points out, we need to *feel* safe in order to be playful.

There are many elements attributing to the problems that can arise in role-playing, as well as the perceived "safeness" of play. Bowman (2013, p.19) summarises that some of the problems come from social dynamics, others from the role-playing itself, including differences in creative agendas, power dynamics, bleed, arguments over rules and speaking ill of other group members. Issues affecting different levels of playing are not clearly separate, however; for example, the power dynamics of the players could influence the power given to certain characters in play.

Rules and norms make things predictable, which in turn makes them feel safer, while unpredictable, non-consensual or badly informed events during play can make one feel unsafe (Stenros & Bowman, 2018.) A feeling of safety can also come from elements of the game's system and rules. As an example, the character that the player uses to act within the world provides an alibi for the player to act differently than they would in their day-to-day life (Mizer et al., 2018). The alibi makes it safer for the player to step outside their comfort zone and try things that could be considered weird or even illegal were they to happen in real life. Power relations between the participants, while sometimes difficult to deal with, can also contribute to the feeling of "game" and the alibi of play. This alibi is connected to the idea of the magic circle; by drawing the boundary between game and life, the players are able to separate their own persona from the character they play (Downey, 2015, p.71).

Games that deal with delicate subjects also require a certain amount of vulnerability from the players. Downey (2015) explains that because of the taboo play taking place within a TRPG group, players must feel safe with the people they play with: there must be trust that the things that happen during play will not be used against them outside the game itself. Playing sexual, violent or complicated political matters could easily lead to problems if presented to outsiders

in the wrong manner. So, in order to engage with these themes, players must feel safe enough to feel vulnerable with their co-players (Downey, 2015, p.77).

All this means that gamemastering a TRPG that feels both safe and playful is no easy task, even in a game with no dark or taboo themes in play. However, when talking about games that do handle very intimate themes – like sex, violence and power – issues of safety need to be considered in one way or other. To successfully guide the game in a desired direction, the The gamemaster needs to know what aspects of the game can affect the player's feeling of safety, and be prepared to face the issues that arise when the content of the story causes the players discomfort. And while it should be noted that this responsibility is not only for the gamemaster to carry, many times the GM is the one with the most power to affect the culture of the table. The risks and problems need to be recognized in order for them to be adequately taken into account.

The next part of the thesis will introduce the main topics that game researchers consider important when striving for a safer playing environment, and a few examples on how these calibrations can be done in a tabletop RPG environment.

2.3.1 Boundaries of play

"Enter freely and of your own free will."

– DRACULA

Fine's (1983) three-tiered frame model is commonly used to analyze and structure the role-playing process. The first frame, the *primary frame*, is the frame consisting of the real world that the participants inhabit as *people.* The secondary or *the game frame* is inhabited by them as *players* who act according to the rules and conventions of the game. The third, *diegetic frame,* consists of the fictional personas or the *characters* the players adapt. (Fine, 1983). Sometimes a moral dilemma could arise when trying to decide which of these levels a piece of information exists (Waskul & Lust, 2004), making the navigations within these frames a question of good roleplaying. As they further describe, "participants must actively establish symbolic boundaries between player, persona, and person and assume the right role in each situation" (Waskul & Lust, 2004, p.344).

The concept of the magic circle, invoked originally by Johan Huizinga (1938) and developed further by Salen and Zimmerman (2004), is also a key concept in TRPG research and very

useful in discussions of safety and boundaries. The magic circle draws a symbolic line between our real selves and the roles we take within the game, making it possible to act according to these momentary rules without disturbing the everyday lives of the participants. Stepping into the magic circle requires the acceptance of this third space and its rules. The magic circle is also often used to describe the protective state of a game - a frame that creates the possibility to enact safely.

However, the lines of the circle are porous. A person cannot leave everything they are outside of the circle, so parts of everyday life, norms and social dynamics will be present in the game space. The events happening *within* the circle do not always stay inside the third space, either. Oftentimes it is impossible to draw a clear line between what is and what is not a part of the game. Stenros (2014) presents that there are actually three levels of boundaries surrounding the activity, defined as

> the 'protective frame' that surrounds a person in a playful state of mind (psychological bubble), the social contract that constitutes the action of playing (a game) (magic circle), and the spatial or temporal cultural site where (or a product around which) play is expected to happen (Stenros, 2014, p.173)

The magic circle, when understood this way, is a product of social negotiation and metacommunication (Stenros, 2014, p.14). This contract enables the participants to assign new meanings to things happening within the borders of the game, and to distinguish them from events happening in the external world.

The term magic circle, while widely used, hasn't been met without criticism. Stenros (2014) explores the most notable arguments against it, pointing out the problems in the separation between play and real life, and the idea of a magical or sacred space created by playing. The core of the presented arguments can be crudely boiled down to the question of 'can we draw a clear line between play and life?'

Role-playing as an activity has its own informal rules and traditions. Montola (2009) notes that RPGs "follow certain endogenous yet implicit rules, making it simultaneously a relatively formal way of expression and a relatively informal kind of a game" (p. 23). However, these rules are not explained in rulebooks; rather, they are learned by taking part in the activity. Understanding the multi-layered nature of these rules and goals can make it easier to communicate preferences, playstyles and personal boundaries to other players. Montola (2009)

combines the work of Fine (1983) and Björk and Holopainen (2003) to propose three layers of rules and goals: endogenous, exogenous and diegetic. Exogenous rules define the out-of-game rules of the playgroup and are part of the social frame of playing. (*"*Do not discuss non-game business during the game"*)*. Endogenous rules are usually defined in the rulebooks used in the game. These rules define how much power characters have and how that power is used. This game frame is sometimes also referred to as the *system* used in play. ("A sword does d10 points of damage"*)*. Diegetic rules are rules that exist within the narrative and fiction of the game. *(*"Carrying a sword within the city limits is punishable by fine"). (Montola, 2009, p.23).

For the player-participants, taking part in a TRPG happens through their characters, and the events within the magic circle are supposed to be treated as if they were happening to the character, not the player. Despite this separation, cross over sometimes happens with thoughts, physical states, relationships and emotions moving from one side of the circle to the other: this crossover is known as bleed (Bowman, 2013, p.16).

LARP studies have shown that bleed between the player and character can happen on many levels (Bowman, 2013; Leonard & Thurman, 2018). Tabletop gaming shares many similarities to LARP: even though the characters are usually not physically portrayed during play, the players use their own experiences and imagination to form their characters' actions, possibly also speaking "as the character". The feelings of the character can be felt by the player as well. It follows, then, that letting go of a character can be difficult. The player might end up wondering where they themselves end and where the character begins? In the article *How Real is Larp?* (2019) Järvelä discusses the complicated relationship of characters and players, and the levels of reality that role-playing happens in. According to Järvelä, while LARPs do happen within a unique social frame – that is, a situation with different social rules – all the feelings and actions that happen within the game are still real. The change in frame simply means that the *meanings* of these actions are not the same within the game as they would be outside it.

Bleed is divided into two subcategories, bleed-in and bleed-out, referring to the direction the information is passing through the magic circle. Bleed-in happens if "out-of-game factors affect the player's experience" (Bowman, 2013, p.17), meaning that the external world passes into the game, while bleed-out refers to in-game factors affecting the player's normal life and real persona (pp. 17-18). The process is often tied to framing: assigning new meanings to the in-game events after the social contract of play ends can be difficult, and the layering of frames can make conflicts more confusing. Although some players feel that the intensive moments of

bleed are the most rewarding parts of role-playing, bleed can also affect the community negatively (Bowman, 2013, pp.17-18).

Transgressive play or bleed-play plays around with the borders of the magic circle (Stenros, 2014, p.11), fading out parts of it to produce even stronger emotional experiences. The aim of this is to keep up the safeness of play while seeking the rawness of the experience (Montola, 2010, p.2). While playing for bleed can be a conscious choice for some players, bleed can happen involuntarily as well, and it can also be born from situations that aren't seen as "triggering" or taboo. What's more, even when a player starts playing in a bleedy experience consensually, quitting the game can be difficult, which in turn can make people overstep their boundaries (Montola, 2010). As Montola (2010) points out, players may feel that abruptly quitting an uncomfortable game could feel worse than playing it until the end and because of this, safety mechanics, such as safe words, do not always work.

Regardless of the prevalence, knowledge on this phenomenon is not common to all TRPG hobbyists. In their study, Bowman (2013, p.16) points out that some RPG players might not know what the term *bleed* means, and others could even fear talking about it - even though there are cases where players have felt depressed or even suicidal because of intense bleed-out after a game. Therefore, if gamemasters wish to create safer playing environments, increasing understanding of the phenomena is essential, so that it can be recognized and dealt with before it gets out of hand.

2.3.2 Sharing the power

Power relations within a TRPG game can be defined in multiple ways, and power can be used within all of the three frames of playing (Hammer et al., 2018). During play, changes are made to the fictional world, but the power to do such changes is not equal between the participants (Hammer et al., 2018). The power to do said changes must, then, be shared in a way that does not diminish playfulness or break off the player's ability to engage with the experience (Hammer et al., 2018). The level of power a participant has can be affected by their role in the game (whether they are a player or a gamemaster), or by their social status within the group. A lower social status may manifest, as an example, by a lowered chance to participate through getting interrupted (Hammer et al., 2018). Finally, power needs to be used in a fair manner, as conflicts can arise if agreed boundaries of power are broken (Bowman, 2013).

According to Montola (2009, p.29), power exists on three levels. Endogenous power exists in the rules of the game – both the visible and invisible ones. Diegetic power can be used within the fiction by the fictional character constructs. Exogenous power is the power that exists outside the game, such as deciding the playtime. While contradicted goals within different frames can provide the game with interesting gameplay (Montola, 2009, pp.25-26) different expectations of goals or rules within these frames, or misunderstandings on who has the power to act within each frame, can make the play difficult. Hammer et al. (2018) describe these layers as power over the fiction, the game, and the socio-cultural context.

Hammer (2007) defines power as agency – meaning the diegetic power characters' have to act within the fictional world, or the players' power to actualise their ideas through their characters – and authority, meaning the power to rule if the suggested changes take effect.

When looking at Montola's (2009) three invisible rules of role-playing, we can see that power is present in all three rules. The power shared between participants is used to define the state of the world, and the existence of a gamemaster and characters make it clear who has the definitional power in the game. The player-participants use their character constructs to define the game world, but their power to make changes to it is notably smaller than the power of the GM. Hendricks (2003) illustrates the negotiation processes that happen during play, showcasing how the participants shift their positions of expertise. Their research shows that players are usually considered experts of their characters, but the GMs expertise could overrule that when talking about cultural aspects of the fictional world related to the character. This negotiation of expertise and power happens within the dialogue of the gameplay.

It is also important to consider the gendered nature of power and its connectedness to certain traits associated with emotions. Socially acceptable behaviour is different to each gender, and women tend to get silenced in formal negotiations (Holt & DeVore, 2005). Acceptable forms of emotions are also different, and the interpretations of displayed emotions differ depending on the gender: for example, displays of anger in men do not affect how effective they are seen as leaders, but displays of anger in women lower their perceived ability to lead (Ragins & Winkel, 2011). If the gamemaster is seen as a master of the game or a leader of the facilitation process, their gender might then, according to these theories, affect how competent other players perceive them in these roles.

2.3.3 Dark play

Tabletop role-playing games are a fruitful ground for playing taboo themes. While the common idea of a TRPGs might be that of exploring dungeons and killing dragons, oftentimes the themes in play are much more varied. Unlike in video games, the content of a TRPG game has no external boundaries; the narrative, themes and plots can all be designed by the participants, making it possible to play anything. Sometimes this can include topics that are not commonly associated with games or fun – such as sexual abuse, torture, war and horror – or themes that are considered taboos, such as race or sexuality.

As Downey (2015) presents in their research, playing with these kinds of dark and taboo themes requires a certain level of intimacy. That intimate state is constructed in different ways, such as carefully choosing who to play with, or by building trust and comfort by negotiating shared play goals. The intimacy must be actively maintained, and boundaries constantly checked for the dark play to be possible. This intimacy, Downey argues, keeps toxicity at bay (pp.29, 60-61).

In addition to the feeling of intimacy and trust, players need their personal alibis to take part in dark play. Downey (2015) presents that the adoption of a character gives players distance to the events of the game by attributing all actions to the character and removing them from the player, hence making dark play possible (p.71). On a related note, dark play is only considered dark because of the players' own moral codes: with no morals entering the magic circle from the social frame, the events within the fiction might not be understood as dark at all (Brown, 2015a, pp.122-123).

People enjoy playing with dark themes in their games for many reasons. *Vampire* games, or at least the rulebooks for them, include themes of personal horror, violence, death, sexuality and unhealthy relationships by default. Ashley Brown's article "Three Defences for the Fourteen-Inch Barbed Penis: Darkly Playing with Morals, Ethics, and Sexual Violence" (2015) explores the questions of this sort of dark play, presenting player's reasons and defences for including it in their game, and argues that "dark, sexual themes can ethically enter role-playing games through rules, and in doing so, can create enjoyable moral quandaries for players" (p.120). The rulebook used by the players in the research, *Freak Legion: Players Guide to the Fomori* (Bridges, 1995) is a part of *White Wolf*'s RPGs, though not related strictly to *Vampire* games, and offers, for example, the trait *Savage Genitalia* that offers players the possibility to give their characters "genitals with some menacing feature" (Bridges 1995, p.37 as quoted by

Brown, 2015a). This trait brings harsh, sexual violence into play in a way that few games ever have done (Brown, 2015a, p.119). Downey (2015) explains that while "playing ugly" does use the same tools used to marginalize players, like sexism, harassment and racism, the play is structured in a way that is meant to "render the monstrous toothless." These narratives are used "to safely understand social injustice" (p.18). However, as Brown (2015a) points out, taboo themes, like the Savage Genitalia trait, can be brought into game for a multitude of reasons.

Playing difficult themes could also be seen as a way of virtual edgeworking. Heather Shay (2017) argues that tabletop RPGs include all the elements of traditional edgeworking (seeking the feelings of being in a dangerous situation without real damage) but exclude the possibility of actual physical harm. While their definition of role-playing differs from the ones used in this thesis, giving more weight to character advancement and combat, the approach can give us tools to understand the reasons for playing with taboo themes. If we see role-playing as edgeworking – as people "voluntarily tread[ing] boundaries to gain emotional rewards" (Shay, 2017) – playing taboo themes is perhaps easier to understand.

While the reasons for playing ugly are varied, dark themes do not just appear into the game randomly. Rather, as Brown (2015a) presents, there needs to be some sort of justification, usually found from either the narrative or the rules of the game (p.132). They also point out the importance of the goals of play when deciding whether a theme can enter play or not; for example, in a game played for the sake of role-playing, content that is requested because of out-of-character sexual desires could be rejected. Such conflicting goals can cause tension between players, and the motivations to play dark themes can make others uncomfortable (pp.132-133).

Vampire games are introduced by the rulebooks as dark and even "fucked up", the fictional world filled with themes of horror. Real issues are encouraged to be brought into play as well. This shows that embracing the play of taboos and dark themes is a core feature of these games:

> The World of Darkness is a fucked-up place. It's full of corruption, violence, and hypocrisy . . . Vampire is a horror game, and its world is a terrible place. As the Storyteller, you don't have to make the real world any worse than it actually is, although you certainly can. . . . There's enough police corruption, institutional neglect and racism, warmongering, hate, and brutality to make your game world dark indeed, if you choose to highlight these features of reality. (Modiphius Entertainment, 2018, p.34)

2.3.4 Creative agendas and social contracts

> *"I think one of the biggest mistakes people make is to assume that any group of players could all have fun together if only you were a good enough DM."*
>
> *Matthew Colville, 2016*

For play to emerge, the participants need to trust that they share similar ideas on how the game should be played and that all participants are striving towards a common goal (Stenros & Bowman, 2018). However, people will not automatically share the same meanings associated with play, and even their goals during play might differ; therefore the participants need to shape their understanding of these issues as a group. Learning to calibrate playstyles and expectations isn't easy or automatic, though, so assistance from the gamemaster or the system might be required (Mizer et al., 2018).

The play culture of a TRPG group is a constant negotiation process. This process can be made more visible with open communication, but it will form without any facilitation, establishing expectations on the rules, immersion level, game content and acceptable social behaviour (Bowman, 2013, p.12).

Creative agendas, originally written by Ron Edwards (2001) and based on the Threefold model by John Kim (1998), are simplifications of players' stances towards the game. While these categories do not cover all possible play preferences, and their universality is controversial (Bowman, 2013, p.13), they do provide a fruitful ground for illustrating the differences of play cultures. There is also some evidence that mismatching play cultures or creative agendas can be a source of conflict (Bowman, 2013; Leonard, 2016*, White et al., 2018*), and so they provide a framework for understanding some of the issues presented in this thesis.

Bowman (2013) presents four separate creative agendas: narrativism, gamism, simulationism and immersionism. A narrativist creative agenda emphasizes the importance of storytelling, including the story and plot. A gamist creative agenda underlines the importance of game-like features, such as rules, winning or problem solving. A simulationist agenda sees the realism and consistency of the fiction as the most important part of play, while the immersionist agenda focuses on the feeling of immersion.

None of these creative agendas are invulnerable to problems, especially if the group disagrees on the creative agenda of the game. A narrativist GM could get angry if players don't follow

her story; a gamist could get frustrated by an unfair interpretation of the rules; a simulationist could see others' interpretation of the published lore as in-accurate or improper, and an immersionist could overlook the enjoyment of others to focus on their own immersion, or use immersion as an excuse to their behaviour (Bowman, 2013).

Social difficulties and group dynamics are present in RPGs just as in any other social activity, but the multiple roles and frames can complicate the issue. In their study on LARP group dynamics, Leonard (2016) states that one reason LARP communities differ from other groups is the fact that the members operate on "multiple layers of reality" and interact with each other both in-character and out-of-character.

When discussing safety and creative agendas in TRPGs, it is also important to consider the ways people are included or excluded from the play. There are different ways of deciding who gets to access a game, and different criteria on how this decision is made. However, even if the idea behind this sort of gatekeeping is to find people that "fit in" well with the group's creative agendas, it is always also a question of access: who do we let in and who do we leave out?

2.3.5 Gameplay calibration

There are some mechanics, developed by players and game-designers alike, that are shared within the community to use in calibrating the intensity of the experience. Many of these mechanics were mentioned in the data collected for this thesis, and the Safer Role-Playing report also brings up many of these mechanics. Most of the more formal calibration tools come from LARP, and they are usually not included in any specific TRPG rulebooks. The fifth edition of *Vampire: The Masquerade* (Modiphius Entertainment, 2018) has, however, included an *Appendix III: Advice for Considerate Play* in the end of the book's pdf version, and a content warning in the beginning of the pdf. The appendix includes guides on playing delicate content such as fascism and sexual violence, describing the most common safety and calibration techniques like the x-card; lines and veils; the OK check-in and debriefing. In this chapter, I will briefly introduce three of the most used techniques, giving example mechanics for both pre- and after-game discussions, as well as a mechanic for adjusting the intensity of the experience during play.

Lines and veils

Lines and veils is a commonly used mechanic developed by Ron Edwards in his book *Sex and Sorcery* (2004) that encourages players to draw boundaries before gameplay. Before the start

of the game, all players write down their “lines” and “veils” on separate pieces of paper. Lines are things that shall not be included in the game and veils are things that may happen, but not in detail; rather the scene will fade to black after establishing the most important aspects (Horstman & Twelves, 2017).

X-card

The X card, a mechanic designed by John Stavropolous (Stavropoulos, n.d.), is a tool for cutting out content during gameplay rather than beforehand. The mechanic starts by placing a card with an X drawn on it on the table. After this, the GM tells everyone that if anyone around the table, at any time, feels like they do not want to continue playing something, they can pick the card up or simply tap on it. They can explain their reasoning if they wish to, but it is never necessary. In either case, the story moves away from that theme immediately. (Stavropoulos, n.d.).

Debrief

Debriefing was originally invented as a mechanic for people working in extremely hard conditions - people who must face traumatic experiences again and again because of their line of work (Hawker et al., 2011; Crookall, 2010). While the usefulness of debriefing has been debated within the community, different versions of this practice are being adapted to most Nordic LARPs as a tool to help players disconnect themselves from their characters after playing, or to handle the possible negative emotions that have risen from the play. Debrief can take many forms, but the main point of debrief exercises, such as having structured discussions about the game and the feelings it brought up, is to facilitate the beginning of the decompression. During the decompression period the participant will slowly leave the fiction and get ready to return to their normal life (Nordiclarp.org, 2019).

3 METHODOLOGY

In this chapter I will present the methodology of the research, as well as the data that was collected. I will also go through some limitations of the study, regarding both technical issues, such as shortcomings of the questionnaire, and the possible ethical points that connect to the validity of this research, such as my own position as a member of the community that was studied.

3.1 Doing qualitative research

Qualitative research methodologies are wide and varied, ranging from many possible epistemological backgrounds, with the shared goal of trying to understand the researched issue from the perspective of someone with experience in it (Vaismoradi et al., 2013, p.398). For this reason, the first step of doing good qualitative research is to define the researcher's methodological and epistemological standpoint.

When defining the appropriate methodology, it is important to first assess what kind of questions the research is seeking answers to (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Montola (2012, pp.313-314) non-constructionist approaches may work when researching static artefacts, but in the case of open-ended and ever-changing games like TRPGs, a social constructionist approach is more suitable. Montola states that in these situations, it is important to understand the different levels the game operates on, as well as the different methods that participants use to negotiate their own, differing constructs of the game during play. And while the events within the fiction are imaginary, they are as real and as constructed as the rules of the game; the whole playing process happens as a construction, based on imaginations, interpreted within the context of the game (Montola, 2012, p.303). The epistemological approach of this research is constructivist in its nature.

The research plan and research questions of a qualitative study are often fluid, changing over the course of the process (Eskola & Suoranta, 2008). Just as in the case of this particular study, this is often due to the interconnectedness of the different parts of the research. After the data has been collected, the focus of the research can shift to better represent the issues present in the material (Eskola & Suoranta, 2008, pp.15-16).

Eskola and Suoranta (2008) state that "[q]ualitative research does not aim for statistical generalisations, instead it aims to present some event, understand a certain behaviour or give a

theoretically sensible interpretation of a phenomenon." (p. 61, translated from Finnish by the author). With the small and niche focus of this research, the participants were chosen as a selective sample. When aiming for a narrow and deep analysis of a certain phenomenon, it would not be useful to select informants randomly, but rather to those people with experience about the matter (e.g. Eskola & Suoranta, 2008; Cote & Raz, 2015). In this case it becomes crucial to collect reasonable material, which, according to Eskola & Suoranta (2008, p.66) means the informants should have somewhat similar experiences, knowledge of the issue from a "doers standpoint" and interest in the research itself.

3.2 Online questionnaires as interviews

In order to gather data from as many people as possible, an online questionnaire was designed. The research plan was that if the data from the questionnaire proved to be too narrow, in-depth interviews would be conducted with some of the people that had answered. For this reason, people were asked to leave their email if they wished to be interviewed. However, the answers to the questionnaire were very thorough, so the interviews were left out. The translated version of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix 1.

As Cote and Raz (2015, p.95) point out, giving people privacy when discussing controversial issues is important. As safety and taboo themes can be controversial issues, the private nature of an online questionnaire was also considered an advantage. Another issue that was considered was the vocabulary of the questionnaire. The assumption was that terms such as bleed would not be familiar to all of the people who answered, so they were not used.

Several issues were considered when constructing the questions. Firstly, the questions – especially the open-ended ones – were written so that they would not appear leading or give the impression of a correct answer (Payne & Payne, 2004). However, some questions contained examples and clarifications, which may have led the participants to answer according to the examples, not the actual question. Secondly, any questions that combined two or more questions (Payne & Payne, 2004) were edited and clarified. Some multi-layered questions still stayed in the final version, and it was clear that most people only answered to one part of these questions. If a follow-up research would be conducted, these questions should be further edited or removed. Thirdly, the order of the questions was written so that they followed a chronological and thematically logical order (Peterson, 2000). Lastly, as the questionnaire was

rather long, all demographic questions were placed at the end, as they do not require much effort to answer (Peterson, 2000).

Bourque and Fielder (2003) point out that it is crucial to consider the motivation and literacy level of the target population when using a self-administered survey. As gamemastering a *Vampire* TRPGs requires reading long and complicated rulebooks, it was assumed that their literacy level would be very high. The level of motivation was difficult to estimate, but given the active safety discussions within the subculture, and the absence of research about it, it was simply assumed that people would find this research interesting and motivating enough to answer despite the length of the questionnaire.

3.3 Data

The data that was analysed in this thesis consists of 41 answers to the online questionnaire, which were collected using Webropol 3.0.. The questionnaire link was shared in multiple Finnish role-play-centred Facebook groups, such as *Roolipelaajien Suomi,* and on the news feed of *Suomen Roolipeliseura,* which included their Twitter and Discord accounts. Of these answers 39 were written in Finnish and two in English. One informant also specified that their mother tongue was Swedish, even though they had answered in Finnish. The nationality of the informants was not asked.

There were 39 questions in the questionnaire: most were open ended, but some multiple-choice questions were also used. The questions that were considered to require most time to answer were put right after the warm-up questions to ensure the informants had energy to answer them at length. The background questions, such as age and gender, were only asked at the very end of the form.

A lot of effort was put into keeping the questions as "value free" and clear as possible. The grouping and order of the questions was also considered so that they flowed logically from topic to topic. The type of language used in the questions, and even the order of questions themselves, can make people answer in a certain way. Some people wrote that they felt like the questionnaire seemed vague, and like there were hidden intentions behind the questions. This feeling could have changed the way people answered.

It is also impossible to know if the answers are "true". As Maanen (1979) points out, lying to and deceiving the researcher are not uncommon practises, especially when it comes to issues

that are important to the informants (p.544). Sometimes the informant might not be aware of the aspects affecting their behaviour (Maanen, 1979, p..546), and as Fisher (2013) states, some topics, such as sex and sexuality, make people answer in very gender-stereotyped ways. For these reasons, the findings of this research, as they are based on self-reports and memories of highly personal issues, should be viewed as social constructions and discourses of the TRPG scene.

The instructions attached to the questionnaire specified that filling the form would take roughly 30 minutes. The actual answers varied in length, but a few people reported using "around three hours" to answer everything, and a few more complained about the length of the form. A shorter questionnaire might have reached a wider group of people.

The questionnaire was addressed for people who had gamemastered a game using any version of *Vampire: The Masquerade*, *Vampire: The Requiem* or other *White Wolf*'s *Vampire* gamesystem. At least one person reported that they had never run a pure *Vampire* game but had rather combined elements from many *White Wolf*'s different books. In my understanding, this is a common way to run *Vampire* games, and might have been the case with many other informants as well. The first version of the questionnaire was tested on two gamemasters that had both run *Vampire* games at some point of their lives. Their answers were very short, which encouraged me to add more detailed questions to the form to ensure it collected sufficient data.

Many informants had a long career of gamemastering behind them, as can be seen in table 1. The last time people had run a *Vampire* game varied (see table 2), with some having their latest experiences over 20 years ago, and some stating their latest game had been just a few weeks or months prior to answering the questionnaire.

Table 1

Years of experience running (any) TRPG

	n	%
Less than 1 year	0	0%
1-5 years	5	12,2%
6-10 years	2	4,88%
11-15 years	7	17,07%
16-20 years	6	14,63%
21-25 years	5	12,2%
26-30 years	8	19,51%
31-35 years	7	17,07%
36-40 years	1	2,44%
over 40 years	0	0%

Table 2

The last time to have run a Vampire TRPG

Year	**1991-1995**	**1996-2000**	**2001-2005**	**2006-2010**	**2011-2015**	**2016-2019**
%	2,44 %	0,00 %	9,76 %	17,07 %	14,63 %	56,10 %
n	1	0	4	7	6	23

Note: The years above are only approximations, as the answers were collected with an open ended question, and included answers such as “5+ years ago” (categorized under 2011-2015) or “over a decade ago” (categorized under 2006-2010). However, it should be kept in mind that

many of the informants have not run *Vampire* games in years, and their answers are based on memories from many years ago.

The age of the participants was asked on a multiple-choice question. A clear majority of people were born between 1976-1980.

Table 3

Year of birth

	n	**percentage**
1961-1965	1	2,44 %
1966-1970	0	0,00 %
1971-1975	7	17,07 %
1976-1980	15	36,59 %
1981-1985	9	21,95 %
1986-1990	6	14,63 %
1991-1995	2	4,88 %
unknown	1	2,44 %

The gender of the informants was asked on an open-ended question. There were multiple genders, but some answers were grouped together for ease of analysis (see table 4). The category “not binary” includes answers such as “gender-fluid, other, human and none” - the category name is descriptive to these answers. I chose not to use “non-binary” as the umbrella term, as that in itself is a gender identity. Those who wrote nothing were included in the “does not wish to answer” category. The “man” category also includes more descriptive answers, such as “assumed male”, and the very specific “cis-, white, meat eating, deadlifting, car driving, working, hetero, dude”. The *attack helicopter* will be discussed in more detail in chapter 5.

In my analysis, I focused on the problems and solutions the GMs talked about. The answers used for this were gathered from all parts of the data, but most of the answers came from open questions concentrating on difficult themes or social conflicts in play.

Table 4

Gender of the informants

	Man	**Not binary**	**Woman**	**Does not wish to answer**	**"Attack helicopter"**
n	27	6	4	3	1
%	65,85 %	14,63 %	9,76 %	7,32 %	2,44 %

There were a few mentions of problematic situations people had experienced as players. These mentions were not included in this analysis, as the focus was strictly on gamemastering, but it is worth noting that some difficult experiences are not seen by the GM and can only be told by the player who has experienced them.

There were two main reasons for choosing specifically Vampire gamemasters. Firstly, the cultures and practices of roleplaying are very varied, even within strictly "tabletop" players. Comparing the differences between gamemasters in Dungeons and Dragons, Fate Accelerated or indie microgames would certainly be interesting and provide a larger view of the hobby as a whole, but would also require a much larger study. This would not have been possible with the time and resources allocated to doing a master's thesis. Restricting the research on *Vampire* GMs specifically allowed for a deeper understanding of a specific group by ensuring all the informants had at least somewhat similar understandings of role-playing and a shared knowledge of at least one game system. With this, I could concentrate on cultures outside the rulebook, as the informants were using very similar rules, systems and settings to run their games by default. It also enabled me to bring up examples from these books, and study if the books themselves provide guidelines to play.

My second reason for choosing *Vampire* games instead of any other TRPG, comes down to two things. First of all, Vampire games are very popular and have been around for over 20 years: this means that there was a good possibility to find people who had run the game at least once. Secondly, as my interest was especially in running difficult or taboo themes, choosing a game about sexualized, power-thirsty monsters felt like a more suitable option than the surely even more popular game of *Dungeons & Dragons.*

3.4 Thematic Analysis

The data was analysed using thematic analysis. This process, as described by Braun & Clarke (2006), consists of six different phases. While these phases were not followed in a strict chronological order, they were still used as a guide on how the analysis should be done.

Braun and Clarke (2006, pp.16-18) describe that the function of the first phase is to familiarize the researcher with their data. They state that immersing oneself in the data to understand the depth and breadth of the contents is vital, as well as reading through the entire data set, not just parts of it, at least once. Taking notes is also recommended, as ideas and patterns will already start to form at this point.

I started my analysis by doing a reading of the whole data set I had collected, printing the data out of Webropol so that each informant's answers were separated. This enabled me to read the answers in the context of the person who was writing them, and to treat the informants more as "interviewees" than faceless answers. Later, the data was also printed as a set that listed all answers to each question without specifying the informants, enabling me to see the variety of answers given to each question. However, as I had already familiarized myself with the informants, connecting individual answers to a broader context was possible.

The second phase, according to Braun and Clarke (2006, pp.18-19), is when the initial codes are produced. They clarify that these codes are not the final themes or units of the analysis, but rather identifications of interesting aspects that could form patterns across the data, and that while searching for patterns is essential, it is also important to avoid smoothing or ignoring the tensions or inconsistencies within the material.

As I had started taking notes during the first phase, the second phase was rather easy. I made notes of points that were relevant to my research questions and highlighted the parts of the text that brought up repeating issues. These codes were quite diverse, varied in broadness, and included codes under many categories, such as "types of gamemaster", "use of power", "bleed", "ways to solve problems" etc. I also wrote notes of inconsistencies and surprising answers and kept a research diary to record my own reactions and feelings about the process.

During the third phase the codes are sorted into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp.19-20). In this process the codes are analysed on a broader level so that the researcher may write more overarching themes based on them. Some codes may be discarded, others merged or formed into mere sub-themes. Some codes may not fit into any of these initial themes, but codes should

not be thrown away just because they do not neatly fit the main themes – rather, they can be sorted to their own "theme" where they wait for a further analysis.

In my analysis, this part was very much connected to the general focusing of the analysis. Codes that weren't relevant to the research questions were cut out, and the remaining ones were analysed and formed into themes that were loosely based on earlier studies and theories on role-playing. Quotes from the data set were organized under each theme, and key words were highlighted in different colours. Notes about tensions within the content were written as well, so that they could be considered later on.

In the fourth phase the themes are reviewed and re-defined (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes without enough data to support them should be cut out; themes too similar to each other combined together, and themes that are too broad broken into narrower ones. This happens in two levels. The first part is reading through the data extracts under each theme to consider if they indeed form a coherent pattern. The second is reading through the entire data to consider whether the themes accurately represent it, if any new extracts should be put under some of the themes, and if the existing data extracts have lost any context during the coding.

I paid a lot of attention to finding all relevant parts of the data under each theme and checking that I had not "cherry picked" them out of their context. During this process I also marked down which of the informants had said the things I listed under the themes. Some of the earlier themes were combined and re-organized under new theoretical frames, while some were again left out to keep the focus of the research narrower. Quotes from the informants were also moved between the new themes.

Finding, analysing and naming the "essence" of each theme is the main point of phase five (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp.22-23). The researcher needs to keep a balance of making the themes comprehensive but not too diverse. In this part the data under each theme is also narratively described – not just paraphrased –to identify the interesting points of those themes. The relations of the themes to the broader research, and to each other, also need to be considered and written out in the analysis. After this comes the phase six (pp.23-24), the reporting, which includes writing the "story" of the research. This written part must include enough evidence to convince the reader that the analysis is valid. This can be done by presenting the narrative of the research clearly, and by providing enough extracts from the data itself to demonstrate that each theme was prevalent in the data.

I analysed the results combining, for example, Stenros' (2014) definition of magic circle as a socially negotiated boundary, the three game-frames presented by Montola (2009), theories on the gendered nature of power and Bowman's (2013) research on RPG group dynamics. With this framework I was able to present problems and solutions in different areas of the gamemastering process.

3.5 Limitations of the study

The first thing to note is that this data could have been analysed in other ways as well, either by using a different methodological approach, such as discourse analysis, or by choosing different research questions. Starting out with a different set of theory could have led the analysis in another direction. The results should, therefore, be seen as a construction born from this specific method, focused strictly on problems and solutions, based on a specific set of theories on role-playing games – not a comprehensive "truth" about the state of role-playing.

Even though the form was tested and proof-read, some mistakes made their way into the final version. However, the mistakes were small and did not appear to affect the answers that were given. The questionnaire was only distributed in Finnish, and within Finnish role-play communities. The decision was made partly because the main goal of the study was to research local play culture, and partly because I do not have the resources to gather and analyse responses on a global scale. A larger sample would have produced more varied results, but with the focus being on Finnish roleplaying, getting answers from across the globe would not have produced much extra value.

The questionnaire had other issues as well. First of all, it was too long: informants reported feeling fatigued or annoyed by the length, which has very likely affected the responses that were given to the questions in the later parts of the form. Secondly, the questions were said to be confusing. Thirdly, as the questionnaire was mostly shared on Facebook, which is generally not used by younger people, answers were only given by people well over 20 years old. It would be interesting to see if the practises or perceived problems are different for young GMs.

The answers also focused on different issues than what I had anticipated. The research underlined the fact that gamemasters have different agendas for doing what they do: some are interested in the act of storytelling and worldbuilding, and consider the plot of the game to be very important; others concentrate on facilitating and experience design, elevating the social parts of playing above the plot or story. This difference in values is probably one reason why I

felt that the answers I got did not answer the questions I was trying to ask. For example, when asking if the person prepares their players for a session in any way, the answers to this question were often on a story-level as well, compared to my expectation, which mostly concerned the social issues or game style calibrations. These issues should be considered in any further studies on gamemasters.

The tone of the questions might have affected the way people wrote about these issues. Some people, when asked about problems they had faced, answered that they hadn't really had any, but then immediately brought up some issues they saw as too small or insignificant to really count. For this reason, it is safe to assume that some small problems were left unreported, and that the issues presented here are the ones gamemasters see as most important. The questions were also said to be hard to understand. This is clear in the answers of one informant, who states that they have not faced any situations where the game would have affected their players, but on another question tells that a player has left their game because of character death. All this said, while the questionnaire was not perfect, and some parts of it were misunderstood, many problems were still reported.

3.5.1 Ethical questions

When collecting answers from people, questions of research ethics and confidentiality need to be addressed. Ethical practices are a cornerstone of good research, and a big part of that in qualitative research is the confidentiality of the researched subjects, as well as their willing participation is the research (Eskola & Suoranta, 2008). Answering the questionnaire was completely voluntary for all people involved, and the answers were stored only on the researcher's two computers and the Webropol service. When presented to supervisors, the data was anonymised. The informant's identity has been guarded over the course of the writing, as well: any personal details, such as exact age or highly detailed game-stories, have been left out or edited to preserve anonymity.

According to Eskola and Suoranta (2008 p.17) objectivity in qualitative research is achieved by recognizing one's own subjectivity. My personal history with role-playing games goes back over 10 years, starting from text-based forum games around 2006, and continuing to tabletop games, LARPs and multiple digital games. I have organized LARPs, run multiple tabletop sessions and written many small games. I have played *Vampire: The Masquerade* and other *White Wolf* games since 2010. All of this makes my position on the research subject very personal, and my experiences will inevitably affect the questions I ask and the results I see. I

have been a gamer since childhood, a role-player since high school, and a game designer since 2014. I am also a queer, nonbinary woman – meaning that toxicity, struggle for authority and a lack of representation have been issues I have faced personally in my career as a gamemaster.

Being familiar with the subject also grants many positive effects. I know the language people use to speak about tabletop games, and I have access to spaces and discussions an outsider might not have. Even the research question is a result of my own experiences in games - I have experienced crippling bleed after an emotional scene in a tabletop game, accidentally run a TRPG to such a twisted representation of suicide that the game had to be quit early, and received detailed reports from players about their characters' sexual activities in between LARP campaigns. I know, from a deeply personal experience, that gamemasters need skills to handle these things.

4 FINDINGS

The analysis is separated in two parts: the problems the GMs faced, and the solutions they described. When reading these answers, it is important to keep in mind that many of the GMs had run their latest *Vampire* games years ago: this means that the descriptions are in some cases based on memories from over 20 years ago, and that the GM's style of running other games might have changed since that time. Many participants also note that the whole culture of gamemastering is different now than it was, for example, 10 or 20 years ago. Whenever there are direct quotes in the analysis, the informant's code number will be given directly after it in brackets, so that the general statistics of that informant, including their last time of running a *Vampire* game, can be checked from the Appendix 1. Parts of the data may also appear under multiple categories.

70,7% of the GMs tell having sometimes run a game where the content was uncomfortable for themselves, with one informant answering that they do it almost always. The same amount of people reported having run games where the content is uncomfortable for the players. However, this number does not represent the number of games that are actually uncomfortable to *run* or *play*. Choosing to play a game with difficult themes can be a very conscious choice, and the uncomfortableness of a certain theme in play does not necessarily mean the participants are not enjoying the game. Even so, sometimes the content can be too much: 17,1% stated having stopped running a game, and 12,2% reported a player having stopped playing their game, because of the game's themes.

4.1 Problem types

The problems the GMs faced are categorized under four different types. The first type, differences in creative agendas, describes problems that rise from very different playstyles. The second, difficult social dynamics, describes problems that arise from difficult social interactions. Bleed, the third problem, talks about problems that can happen when the lines of "real life" and play get blurred in one way or another. Difficulties with power and diegesis were the fourth problem, handling issues of misunderstandings and unclarity. The GMs also described practical issues, such as problems with memory or time management, as well as problems related to the planning and writing of the story, but as the focus of this research was on the social frame of playing rather than the practicalities or narrative design, I have chosen to leave those answers out of this particular analysis.

4.1.1 Different creative agendas and playstyles

Differences in creative agenda or playstyles was a very common problem. People described players being too immersed or not immersed enough; players commenting on scenes their character was not a part of; players feeling weird about playing certain aspects of the game and concentrating on wrong aspects of the game, for example wanting to resolve everything with violence. While some qualities came up more often – like gamist players, or players who wanted to argue about rules – it could also be seen that one GM's problem player might not be difficult for another GM. It was also mentioned that the hardest part of running a game was fitting together different personas, players and play styles so that everyone still enjoyed the game. Open discussions were often said to be the solution to these problems, though sometimes differences also lead to some players being left out or leaving the group.

The problems with different creative agendas came up most often with descriptions of problematic players or player types, or by disagreements in the purpose of play. These descriptions varied between the answers, but the most referenced "difficult" player type was tied to a gamist creative agenda: playing to win, wanting to argue about rules, powergaming etc. were mentioned. This style of play was even said to not be fit for playing Vampire. Other "wrong kinds of players" included immaturity, not enough prepping, too much prepping, players who are into the published lore, just hanging around, PvP[8] playing, solving problems with violence, HC playing, not enough immersion and too much immersion. Some GMs showed understanding of this issue by stating that the *Vampire* games could work for anyone, but any certain GMs games required players that fit the style of that specific GM.

This issue was also connected to players paying attention to wrong things within the game. This came up as players who were ignoring the GMs plots and concentrating on their own character; players who paid too much attention to rules about weapon damage etc; players who wanted to play for conflict.

> "other players (and characters) are "easier", arriving at their planning session with a small novel about their character, others are more difficult because all the information about the character has to be forced out. It's really difficult to come up with as much content to the latter group as it is to the one with the character novel with them." (4)

[8] Player versus player

> “the most challenging situations have been . . . where too much character immersion . . .threatens to break the whole game.” (9)

> “once a player decided to play-to-lose by themselves and made all the wrong choices in a critical situation because they thought it was fun. I wasn’t able to stop the game in time to say “NOT LIKE THAT”.” (17)

> “mostly those who are really excited about the World of Darkness lore and metaplot. They lack the ability to adjust to the gamemaster’s vision.” (36)

> “. . .when we have been so young that a zero-session wasn’t even invented yet. . .and a player wanted to make their character to be a victim of sexualized violence and oppression for reasons I really don’t want to reminisce or guess, and as a gamemaster you think you’re required to fulfil every player’s wishes . . . It makes you feel like you’ve been involuntarily put inside someone’s fantasy.” (17)

> “Really the only challenging situations have been with players who are stuck up on the rules and play to “win”. Every single comma has to be dug up about every single thing, to argue why the characters wouldn’t take damage or lose an argument with a Prince etc…” (26)

The creative agenda differences could also be seen with players not respecting the themes or style of play. This could come up with one player taking the game to a different style than the rest of the group, someone reading too much lore and not respecting the GMs vision, or people purposefully playing in a style that was not fit for the group.

> “I used to take in people I didn’t know that well, friends of friends and so - and for some reason it’s always been a disaster . . . It turned out none of these people had bothered to read the two-page illustrated “advertisement” for the game, or bothered to check what system or version of the game we were using. . .” (7)

> “Players who are just slightly outside of the genre, meaning they don’t quite sync with the other players or the game master. An adult conversation about the themes and atmosphere usually helps.” (32)

> “Most challenging are the situations where a player doesn’t respect the game’s atmosphere and thematic. Usually so that everyone else is playing an atmospheric horror-game, and one player wants to completely change the direction to humour, splatter or superhero stuff. The GMs responsibility in keeping up the mood is quite heavy then. There are no ready solutions to this, because the situation always depends on the players and the group dynamics.” (22)

There were also mentions that people with different play styles were problematic because it was hard for the GM to support each playstyle and offer enough content.

> "This hasn't happened in Vampire, but generally it's difficult if the group disagrees on what kind of a game they are playing . . . As a gamemaster I feel like I should support everyone's playing, but if the goals are contradictory, this is hard. In a situation like this no one is really playing wrong, so it's hard to tell anyone to change their stance. The problem escalates if only one person is playing differently than others. In a situation like that I feel it's difficult to support that one "different" player's creative output in a way that their effort would build the shared story, and that they wouldn't end up being an outsider compared to the rest of the group. (6)

4.1.2 Difficult social dynamics

In any social setting, group dynamics, disagreements between participants and other social aspects are sometimes difficult. Social problems were common, although not present in all play groups, and varied in intensity. They were also related to age; some people said that they have had more of these problems when they were younger.

Very often the problem seemed to be the lack of communication. Gamemasters described that they had sometimes felt that they could not refuse if players asked them to run something in the game, or that it had taken them time to learn to say "no" to players. Sometimes people were also afraid of talking about problems face-to-face, which led to the entire campaign ending. Speaking over others, speaking too loudly or making jokes about someone's character also came up, and very often the solution to these problems was communication – daring to tell players to not joke about certain things, or clearly stating that they were behaving in a way that is not acceptable. Toxic behaviour was also a problem. This included participants not respecting the other players' boundaries and dissing other people for their choices in the game.

The first problem was conflicts between players. The reasons for this could be due to character interactions or issues outside the play. Often resolved by talking, but in worst cases these schisms could lead to the campaign ending or one player leaving the group.

> ". . .one time the situation got so bad that one player unfortunately left the game, but the worst anger/angst got diffused by being open." (2)

> "An argument between two player-characters that I feared would reflect to the players as friction or annoyance towards the other's supposedly "space taking" playstyle. Instead, both

> players suggested talking after the session, and in the end we all laughed about the issue together . . .” (7)
>
> “The disagreements of two players outside the game . . . forced [me] to stop playing with that group.” (10)
>
> “Two players got in an argument, and in the end I had to make them sit together in a separate room to set things straight.” (18)

Another issue was disruptive behaviour. This could include talking on top of others, yelling, joking about one player, judging other player’s choices in the game, disrespecting the boundaries of others, being drunk or spreading cruel rumours. One informant also reported having dealt with a player who came to play while drunk.

> “Players who have acted rudely towards me and others. Sadly, I didn’t know how to handle the situation strongly enough. Luckily, a friend that had joined my game table back then was able to be assertive. And the situation got dissolved by talking. Unfortunately, some players spread rumours of us as a revenge, but this is all left behind, and we have learned from our mistakes, on both sides of the fight” (11)
>
> “Once I had a player who wanted to point out off-game every time they thought they saw where a scene was going, or where the rails had been hidden, loudly sighing that now they had done what the GM had meant to be done. I was pissed off by this sort of smartassness. This got solved by the one-shot game really staying as a one-shot, and not leading to any new games with said player.” (17)
>
> “A player started to badmouth other players for their ingame choices. I stopped the situation and explained that the players had played in a way that was faithful to their characters, and gave the [disruptive] player a chance to apologize and continue, or leave the campaign. They left the campaign.” (36)

There were also mentions of social anxiety causing problems for both the GM and a player. However, this did not stop the playing, but rather required extra preparations to make the activity less stressful.

4.1.3 Bleed

Bleed, especially players experiencing bleed, was described as a problem in three main ways. Both bleed-in and bleed-out were described. These answers came up mostly from two questions: imagining what the GM would do if their players ended up in a fight due to things

done in character, or what they would do if a player was worried about their character's fate. There were also multiple positive or neutral stories of bleed that were not presented as problems, but these stories are not analysed in depth.

The first narrative was that of bleed as immature, or as a failure of a social contract.

> "Sometimes the players take the betrayal of the NPC characters heavily and feel like I have betrayed them. I need to get them to calm down and make it clear that it's not about some personal grudge." (12)

> "[in one-shot games] [there's] more of this healthy "think of your character as a stolen car"-attitude, so the unnecessary worrying about the character's survival gets lost." (32)

> "If we stay within normal feelings and their expression, then this would sound great. I would feel that the player is taking the events in the game "seriously" enough and doesn't just think of it as a useless pastime activity." (8)

This narrative was also tied to "this is just a game" speech, underlining the importance of tight separation between game frame and social frame. The presented solution for this sort of bleed was the clarification of boundaries, which could be done by reminding the players of the fictionality of the game, or by finding out about the player's real-life issues that could be the cause of problems in game. Disapprovals towards bleed could also be seen as a moral stance: if one believes they would never fail to disconnect themselves from a character, those who do might be seen as having failures in this moral virtue (Maanen, 1979, p. 547).

> "The characters need to be separated from real life. My own group is made of adults, so this problem hasn't appeared. If the group is made of teenagers, then this problem can be more common." (19)

> "We are experienced enough as players that the events in a game don't get under our skin even if someone gets backstabbed a bit." (31)

> "I would go through the situation, and if adults couldn't separate the characters and players from each other, then I'd probably quit the game, or then the game for one of those players would end." (37)

> "It's hard to imagine a situation where the players end up in a fight instead of their characters . . . It's somehow difficult to understand in this day and age that a situation like this would happen." (9)

Sometimes the games were described to have caused very strong emotional effects in the players. Playing had made people realize things about their sexuality, and real life traumas could get triggered during play, One answer also stated that it wasn't really the themes of the game that caused bleed, but rather a very deep immersion into character – further supporting the claim that the blurring of lines between real life and game enabled strong, emotional bleed.

> "The most difficult situations are those where a real-life trauma surfaces for the player. My players are all very good at taking care of themselves but sometimes these things can come from surprising directions. The most intense content, like sexual violence, is rarely the reason for this. So far the worst cases have been caused by relationship dynamics that remind the player of a real life traumatic relationship they've experienced, or by references to harassment reminding them of real life harassment they have faced. This is difficult because it's hard to face someone's pain. The solution is to listen, talk, and change the game so that these problematic associations don't come up." (14)

> "Because I run such immersive games, I've noticed that settings where a character gets into . . .a situation that creates very negative feelings, might cause real anxiety in the players . . . some players enjoy this (one of my players once started to cry together with their character but immediately signalled to me that I shouldn't stop or even slow down, . . .) for others I try to steer clear of too excruciating situations . . . this doesn't seem to be really connected to the theme . . . but rather to the intensity of the atmosphere, and a very deep immersion" (4)

> "My way of running a horror game is based on players often taking the bad guy's role, and the moral hangover hits afterwards." (14)

There were also a couple of mentions of bleed as a sign of commitment. Strong feelings caused by the game were understood as a positive sign, and a lack of such could even be seen as bad. This narrative of bleed was also read as a sign that the game has been meaningful on a narrative level, and not just "casual fun."

4.1.4 Sharing power

Even though the choice of the game surely affects the players that join, the different understandings of diegesis come up often. The style or content of the game is not obvious without a discussion, even when all participants know what books the game will be based on, as the styles of playing Vampire games are very varied (Ericsson, 2017). Discussions and calibrations are needed even if everyone knows what rules or systems are used. The gamemasters had different ways of using or defining power. Some stated that the GM was the

ultimate god, some preferred a very democratic approach. However, problems originating from different expectations on the sharing of power, or the state of the fictional world, could be seen across the answers.

On her research about role-playing as edgework, Shay (2017) defines that the three defining factors on what transforms an activity into one of edgeworking are the "conscious and voluntarily choice of a course of action that entails higher-than-usual risk of a bad outcome", intentionally testing one's self-efficiency and worth, and an exaggerated sense of control. When examining roleplaying through this lens, it is clear that in order for edgework in a TRPG to succeed the players must know when their characters are about to face danger, and they must sustain control of their character's actions. Many gamemasters did indeed say that players felt uncomfortable if the power to control their own character was taken away, and described situations where players felt nervous if it became unclear what was safe or unsafe for them to do within the fictional universe. This is an issue of power sharing, player agency and clarity of diegesis.

In the *Turvallisempaa pöytäroolipelaamista* report (Kyllönen et al., 2020), many people had stated that losing control of their character was a negative experience. When looking at agency within the fictional world, it can be seen that the player only has agency through their character. If the character is killed or destroyed, their power within the story disappears. This means that even if the death is dramatic or narratively appropriate, the player might have a hard time viewing this event in a positive light, especially if they have not specifically asked for the death to happen. For the GM, who views the story, power and agency from a very different viewpoint, this negative reaction might seem exaggerated.

The first problem with power sharing was unclarity in the interpretation of rules. Small, non-disruptive disagreements about rules were common, but sometimes the conflicts could even lead to players leaving the group. This unclarity could extend to the question of who had the right to read the written rulebooks at all, and to what length the written rules should be used. The unclarity of power-sharing is not just between the GM and the players, but also between the participants and the rulebook: the books' power over the rules could be understood either as absolute or as just mere guidelines. Sometimes problems were also connected to misuses of power, such as a player using their agency in a way that was seen as inappropriate, or the GM using their power outside the game.

> "Conflicts on rule-disagreements with the players. When the discussions have gotten long I have made it clear to my players that I have made my decision, and that the player can either accept it or rethink their participation in the game." (23)

> "One player thought they could interpret the rules to their own advantage and got offended when I explained that this was a Storytelling-game, where the rules are just sort of guidelines, and that my decision is final." (31)

The second problem arose when limiting the players' agency or when misunderstandings of character's agency happened, either by accident or on purpose. All in all, the player's control over their own character was very strong, based both on the open questions and the multiple-choice questions, where 26,83% stated they had never taken control of a player-character without permission from the player. Some GMs also stated they purposefully avoided situations where they might reduce the player's agency. However, misunderstandings on diegesis could lead to a situation where the player's understanding of their character's agency didn't meet the GMs understanding of the narrative, thus making the player feeling anxious or confused.

> "Some (many?) players understandably don't feel comfortable if their power over their own character is diminished, or if something is done to the character that makes playing them in the future uncomfortable (like ruining the character's looks). This is why I've tried to avoid such situations." (39)

> "If players are very young and inexperienced and don't realize that there are limits to every game about what you can do :D. They easily assume being all-powerful :D." (29)

> "A couple of times I've changed the genre of the game mid-campaign, the characters have in theory stayed the same, but the players haven't recognized them as quite the same anymore, which has decreased the enthusiasm to play." (34)

> "Ah...One player had a paladin-complex and I had to sort of set them straight on the honour codes of knights in the middle ages. It was a really difficult task to make them believe that common folk were really not people but just a resource (exaggerating)" (18)

Sometimes uncertainty in the lines of character agency could even cause bleed. Players were said to have experienced anxiety over their character´s choices within the narrative.

> "The game session in itself had gone really well, but after the session "debrief" a few players commented that they had gotten anxious in real life as well, because their characters were under constant watch, and they realized it paralyzed them as players as well. They felt too deeply their

characters' emotion, "if I screw up now, I'll face the last walk into the morning sun." Even as players they no longer knew where their characters' "safe zones" were. . ." (4)

"One challenging situation I have encountered in a game was when a player reacted really strongly on the consequences of their character's choices . . . the victim [of the character] died, because the player character left them lying on the ground of the central park during winter. In my opinion this fit both the character's inexperience and the haze of the situation, so I didn't remind the player that they are leaving an unconscious person to lie on the snow. A little bit later the player realized the situation and reacted in a way that was surprising to me and felt that they should have realized all this sooner, because they didn't want their character to kill. The situation was solved by talking" (15)

4.2 Solutions

The GMs described many methods of handling different problems. These solutions have been categorized into three different methods. *Calibrations* describe different approaches to negotiating the content of the game before it begins. *Directing* talks about how gamemasters decide the direction of the game during the play. *Aftercare or decompression* means the activities done after the game.

Problems were handled before, during and after the game. It could be said that for some, the game's narrative was the number one priority, while to others it was the players. This does not mean, however, that the game would be irrelevant to those prioritizing the players, or that the players would not be important to those prioritizing the game. The solutions and preparations included methods for handling both the storyteller position (e.g. planning the plot) and the directional position of a GM (e.g. collecting information on player's play preferences). The social aspects of gamemastering also came up, as the informants described their ways of finding suitable people to play with, the problems of bleed and the challenges of running games to very different players. Handling difficult or taboo themes was done by calibrating the content to the specific group or session, and the avoidable themes were either asked about in advance or noted by the GM keeping an eye on the players reactions during play. Not all information about their games are handed out freely, though, and many parts of the plot etc. are kept secret from the players to keep the experience interesting and surprising.

While these styles can be separated into their own categories theoretically, in reality many GMs use a combination of the three. Discussing with players before the game could be used to leave out the most controversial themes, and after that the diegesis would work as a guideline on

what is suitable. Trusting the players to speak up if a boundary is crossed does not in itself mean that no other measures have been taken to calibrate the experience.

Perhaps the most important aspect in how preparations were done was the GMs familiarity with the group of players. Games with familiar players and close friends needed less preparations, as the GM might already know what sort of things would not suit the group. Many also mentioned that preparations were done in the beginning of campaigns, but not before individual play sessions unless there were sudden changes in the story, emerging themes that hadn't been agreed upon before the game, or if the GM was unsure if the players would be okay with a certain plot. Preparing for difficult content was also important for the GM as a storyteller, to ensure the content fit the story and that they wouldn't freeze up while describing the events.

As the questionnaire was mostly concentrated on social problems and emotionally intense themes, the social preparations were described more than the story-related practices. However, many of the preparations could be read as trying to avoid different problems – agreeing on the content everyone wishes to play can help avoid conflicts outside play, and preparing content for the story can help the GM if players do unexpected things. The storytelling cannot be divided from the social aspect, as the game itself is a shared and social storytelling activity.

However, many people mentioned that any theme can be run if it fits the narrative and all players are okay with it. Playing dark themes, violence and horror was, in many cases, seen as something that belongs to Vampire games. However, many people also said that the game could be played in many ways, and that with the right GM it could suit anyone.

Prepping for groups with unfamiliar players was more intensive, as was the prepping for the beginning of a campaign even with familiar players. Prepping could include a so called 0-sessions, where the group would not play, but just talk about the themes and content of the game they were about to start playing together. People also described ways of asking about possible triggers or unwanted content in different ways, such as using written forms or group conversations around the topic. Playstyles were also a thing people talked about before the game, and one respondent described that their group would always agree to respect all player's ways of playing their characters before the start of the game. I call these ways of "calibrating" the play to suit all players. Often these activities happen outside the actual time reserved for play. One GM also said they don't prepare their players ahead of time, as they strive to keep the game strictly within the playtime. However, this does not mean there is no prepping done during the play session.

4.2.1 Calibrations

The most common way of ensuring the group functioned well together was pre-game content calibrations, done in three ways. According to the answers to the multiple-choice questions, almost all (97,6%) GMs had negotiated the content of the game with the player's at least sometimes, 39% stating they do it almost every time. 92,7% stated they have talked about the game's content with a player or players after playing, with 17,1% stating they do it almost every time.

The multiple-choice questions show that physical violence was present in all the GMs games, although killing player characters was much rarer. Power, mental health and horror were also themes that every GM reported using. Mental violence was present in almost all games on some level, but sexual violence, war and torture were rather uncommon. The same could be seen also from the open-ended questions, where rape-scenes, violence towards children and detailed torture were often brought up as themes that were not included in the game, either because of the GMs own preferences or by the player's request.

The first way was making agreements on non-playable content. This could be done in many ways - some mentioned having 0-sessions, others used written forms to ask everyone about possible triggers. Most often these were done before the start of a campaign, but sometimes clarifications were needed before certain sessions for some specific plots. This style was seen as more important if playing with unfamiliar players, and some also mentioned that they don't ask about avoidable content up front, but rather make informed guesses based on their knowledge of the person. One informant also stated that "not having a 0 session" was a problem, which reinforces the idea that many problems can indeed be avoided by clear communication of shared play culture, rules, social norms or boundaries.

> "I organize a zero session where we agree on the themes we will not play with the group. I don't see any special value on trying to shock the players, but I do value surprises even more, which is why my gamemastering style isn't see-through" (17)

> "For example, I won't put violence towards children to a young father's game or put sudden and important social conflicts in front of a player who panics in social situations." (23)

> "The solution is to have a discussion with the players before the game about the themes we want or don't want. For example sexual violence, which might accidentally slip into the game where the characters are basically walking date rape-metaphors, is the kind of theme where you

have to very clearly define how far people are okay with addressing it, and when you need to cut." (13)

"I asked players' triggers with a form (not face-to-face with others) before the game . . . there have been things I've been asked to avoid, concerning people's triggers and histories of trauma." (7)

"In the beginning of a campaign we have a prepping-session where we go through the game's content. We don't prepare for individual games." (14)

". . . i talk about the games and themes with the players in advance, because I want to produce intense emotional experiences through my games, and there can't be themes that bring up traumatic experiences in the players . . . If a situation gets too uncomfortable for a player, we take a break and talk about it if needed. I take this into consideration as we move forward, and the story moves away from the thing that caused discomfort." (15)

"I don't really want to handle sex in a game when playing with teenagers as it's a sort of delicate subject in that age. There's a difference, after all, in how an adult and a teenager talk about sex - when sex is discussed, it needs to happen on the teens' terms and language." (29)

Pre-game discussions were also important in establishing the social contract of play, and in making sure the group shared similar-enough creative agendas. This could include agreeing on the theme of the game or certain habits or values of playing.

"I always make it clear to the players that the game's goal isn't necessarily to win or to succeed but to tell a good story. I also make it clear that the player characters can die . . . and that player characters and players are different things, and that everyone has the right to throw themselves into the game and play the way they want to, without fearing the judgement of any other participants (this is our rule that everyone agrees to)." (15)

"Before the campaign, we talk about the style and themes. The purpose of this is to make sure the players are interested and suitable for the planned game." (23)

The GMs also changed their style of running a game depending on the players or the mood they were aiming for.

"And then, of course, it's dependent on who sits around the table and what they want from the game." (13)

". . .what affects it more is if we play "seriously" or "just for fun", the latter also being a valid style of play, then I tolerate more off-game speech and joking etc." (30)

However, it could also mean that the personal boundaries of players were taken into account before the play began: for people not interested in horror themes, another game or another gamemaster would be chosen. The focus on this was choosing the right players for the right game and staying coherent with the GMs vision. This could also mean that even if a player did mention some themes to be bothering them, the solution might be leaving that player out rather than changing the content.

> "I don't typically change my style of gamemastering according to the players, because it's easier to pick some other game that suits everyone than try to run Vampire in a way that's unfamiliar to me. In a way, the players are considered before the game is chosen." (6)

> "However, I wouldn't want to "lower the quality of the campaign" because one player feels the game's integral themes or mechanics are too heavy." (37)

4.2.2 Directing play

Sometimes personal boundaries are crossed during play. Sometimes the plot changes direction in the middle of a session. In these situations, it is up to the GM to decide if and how the direction of the game could be changed. The GMs had varying attitudes to this: some said making changes to the themes could break the story, others were quick to change even events that had already happened. I call this direction changing during game directing.

A common principle for choosing the direction of the game or for solving conflicts was only using things that fit the narrative of the game. Surprises, shocking situations and taboos could be brought into game if they made diegetic sense. This meant that all situations, even the shocking ones, would be outlined and prepared for in advance, so that the mood and narrative of the game stayed coherent. Sometimes this could be only preparation in the game, as the players – who were assumed to understand the type of game they are playing– were not expected to be shocked with the content they faced.

> "If one of the [player]characters has done something that doesn't fit that character and is causing a conflict between players, I try to figure out that player's motivations" (27)

> "When we've played *Vampire* it's been taken for granted that these kinds of themes may come up in play. That's why I haven't really had to prepare. There's more need for preparations if things come up suddenly, like when playing D&D for example. If there's new players, I would absolutely not bring such themes into play suddenly." (1)

> "If it's logical in the world, it can come into play. Players are adults and they can say if some thematic isn't suitable for them at the moment/at all" (18)

> "I have once let a child character be played by a player, and they had a very thoroughly thought out concept and backstory for that character - it also helped that this player was one of the people who had played with me the longest, and also gamemastered games for me, so I could trust them 100%" (4)

One solution was giving the power to bring dark themes into play to the players and trusting them to enforce their own boundaries. This discourse was also sometimes connected to the maturity of the players; trusting that you are playing with people who are "adult" enough to tell if you step over their boundaries, or "mature" enough to handle playing such themes. This way both the power and the responsibility of the player's comfort was left to the players themselves.

> "In my experience we have the sort of trust around our table that we can play any themes, and if we come across something someone doesn't want to play, the players will speak up about it." (36)

> "I'll rather let the players bring and create the surprising and rough elements. They know their limits better than I do. And then I moderate so that no player gets run over. by others" (11)

> "if something uncomfortable happens (like sexual violence) then it's the players' idea, not mine, and everyone needs to be ok about it" (16)

Some people relied on their common sense and discretion to sense when they were about to cross boundaries, or if the play should be directed to a different direction. This style emphasises the importance of the GMs own social skills and emotional intelligence.

> "Keeping tabs on the players' reactions and gestures during play is important, and moderating the content accordingly. Sometimes it's important to lighten things up and contrast the ordinary life or the characters' free-time and socializing to the rest of the plot." (7)

> "Because of heavy themes, the gamemastering takes social intelligence and understanding what is ok and what isn't at any given time." (14)

> "I try to use common sense so that I won't serve any themes that actually cause discomfort. I know my players and they know me" (8)

> "I trust my players and try to keep up a culture where it's ok to tap out. During the game I try to pay attention to the game's energy and ration the distressing content according to what works for the players." (14)

For some, keeping an open dialogue during play was the way to direct play. They encouraged players to communicate their boundaries actively, both before, during and after the session. In campaigns, the dialogue could also happen in-between sessions. While this method leaves perhaps less room for misunderstandings and enables an active pushing of boundaries, it will not work if the group members do not feel safe to speak up. It is also important to note that the GM could also speak up themselves to say they did not want to run a certain theme anymore.

> "Many of my players also enjoy it if I lead them to the limits of their own comfort zones, but I keep an open dialogue about where the line goes, if I can push forward a bit more or if I should ease up a little" (4)

> "These days, in my game groups, we talk a lot between games, after them and during them about what affects how comfortable the game is . . . this probably would have never happened if I hadn't, for example, gotten away from the toxic game groups and social circles." (11)

Sometimes, if for example the GM did not want to get into a conflict with a player or did not know how to handle situations out of game, the solution could be to handle the problem within the fiction. This style was sometimes referred to as a bit immature: a few people told that they used to handle problems like this, but had since learned to talk about things more openly, but it was also used to preserve the integrity of the narrative. Using the fiction or rules of the game could also be used to build extra layers of safety or agency, like saving the player character from death by narrating them falling into torpor[9], or to guide the players into the desired game style with in-game rewards.

> "The new player in the group . . . turned out to be a total, attention seeking idiot . . . eating my and the other players' nerves, but we didn't dare to tell them this upfront. In the end I got fed up with the whole campaign, very plainly killed off all player characters and gave the players no possibility to affect it. We didn't invite that player to our campaign anymore." (34)

> "When you realize a situation is going very differently than planned and this causes anxiety to the players, but because I feel that in role-playing games "hey it didn't go like that after all"

[9] A coma-like state that a Vampire can fall into if she takes too much damage in the game

> or take-backs are bullshit, so I just have to roll with it and try to make the situation better from within the game world." (37)

> "The most challenging situation has been where a player character ended up plotting against another player character. . . I ended up solving the situation with a powerful NPC that was an ally of the character being threatened, taking that PC under their wing and ruining the plans [of the other PC]. If a similar situation came up now (15 years later), I would probably try to have more meta communication about it with the players." (39)

Sometimes attempts at solving a situation within the narrative could prove in-effective. In one case, a GM described a situation where players had felt distressed about a situation in game. Their approach of asking for a plan of action had not worked.

> ". . .when the players felt powerless because they had mis-interpreted some information about a situation . . . the situation didn't really get solved, because I asked the players to tell me their plans on how they planned to approach the situation, and I still haven't gotten that plan" (37)

It was also considered important to keep brakes and give people time to adjust to new content in the game.

> "It's always ok to take toilet breaks and reflect things if needed. We divide the playtime so that no one gets overloaded too much or preferably at all." (11)

> "I arrange the situations themselves so that we have enough time to play . . .and take breaks if needed and talk about things after the game, if there's need to. We also have a small reflection moment about the game after each session, where each player tells about their character's experiences about the game, and of course about their own experiences and feelings." (15)

> "If a player needs time to digest a situation, we can play some other scene with other players for a while or even stop playing for a moment to savour the situation. It's been years since I last run a Vampire game, so these days I would also use some safety mechanism like the x-card if the game content was shocking." (6)

4.2.3 Aftercare / decompressing

Feedback was collected from players for many purposes. Firstly, it was considered important to give players room to talk about any uncomfortable feelings that could have come up. Many also pointed out that players had good ideas for the plot and that the GM could secretly collect

these ideas through after-session discussions. These discussions could also work as a general indicator on how the group was feeling about the game, and if changes were needed to the pace or atmosphere. Some GMs also asked for specific feedback in order to develop as gamemasters.

> "Often, it's fun to just hang out and talk about the game, decompress from the intensive feelings of the game and calmly detach from the immersion . . . I might guide the players to analyse how they felt as players, and I make a note if I need to tune something, like the atmosphere or the intensity. Also if something in the session has gone under someone's skin on the wrong way, we talk about that either as a group or one-on-one with the player . . .the same goes if something has gone under a player's skin in an exceptionally good way, I will gladly talk about it more so that I can do that the next session even better." (4)

> "Debriefing happens seemingly informally either over beer or coffee, but it always happens. We talk about games afterwards when we meet, just not formally." (25)

> "If players themselves bring things up then yeah, sure. It's important that everyone enjoys themselves while playing. Reminiscing/reflecting the shared game experiences also builds team spirit" (28)

> "We have talked about [problems] after the game. Systematic debriefs have cleared the air in many situations" (32)

Limiting access to the games was also a common solution, and most gamemasters reported only running games for people they already knew. If playing with an unfamiliar group, both the experienced problems and the preparations were different than when playing with familiar people.

5 DISCUSSION

This analysis showcases that TRPGs are not free from problems. Issues of creative agenda differences, social dynamics, bleed and power can make the gaming experience difficult or dysfunctional, sometimes even breaking apart existing groups. There are also many solutions to handling these problems, although the study also shows that not all gamemasters use the same methods, or the methods that would be efficient in the given situation.

Because of its sensitive topics, Vampire games are mostly played with friends and experienced role-players. Gamemasters have a wide array of methods, like pregame agreements, to use in

order to calibrate the gameplay. However, problems and disagreements within groups are not uncommon and can even lead to players leaving the game. The ways to handle problems are often informal rather than official and rely on the gamemasters own expertise and social skills. Many of the problems were tied to communication: speaking up when someone crosses a boundary, talking about playstyles with the players and giving space for people to discuss their experiences after the game. Ability to read the social situation was important and could help noticing when players needed a break or when the atmosphere was getting too grim.

The GM can be understood as both the narrative designer and the project manager of the game. This means they need to handle both jobs in order for everything to run smoothly, or at least ensure that both things are taken care of by someone else in the group.

Gamemasters used multiple different tactics to ensure a safer and more enjoyable game for all participants. These included calibrations, which could be related to the exogenous, endogenous or diegetic frames of the game; directing, which focused on the direction of the narrative; decompression, which was used to prevent problems in social dynamics and to facilitate the changing of frames between game and "real life"; and exclusion, which left out players that were ill-suited for the specific game. Most of the solutions focused on either the exogenous (player) or the diegetic (narrative) frame, even though problems with exogenous issues, such as the division of power to interpret rules, were clearly present. While there are surely multiple reasons for this – one being the focus of the research questionnaire on social problems – it is still possible that more tools for handling the issues related to endogenous issues are needed.

Gender and sexuality came up in a few answers, but less than expected. A few gamemasters stated that their *Vampire*-game groups had more women than their other game groups. Some taboo themes –most notably sexual violence – were also considered to be gendered, and one GM mentioned leaving out rape-narratives to be more considerate to the women around their table, stating that it was an easy choice as these themes were a cliché anyway. Though this does showcase that people are willing to make changes to the content of their game, it is notable that rapes are talked of as clichés: not as something to be avoided due to their inherent traumatic nature, but because they have been played so much it has become boring.

A discourse of "matureness" was also present throughout the different themes, placing experiences of bleed, intense emotions and social conflicts outside of the acceptable behaviour within the magic circle. As the issues around both emotions and power are deeply gendered (Holt & DeVore, 2005; Preston, 2016; Ragins & Winkel, 2011), it is interesting that gender

was so very absent from the answers, mostly coming up in descriptions of play groups or avoidable thematics. While many of the remarks about "immature" or "abnormal" emotions were answers to questions where the informant was requested to imagine a situation, rather than recollections of actual events, it would still be interesting to see how the actual policing of emotions is conducted. Are there certain types of players that are associated with being too sensitive, and thus do not get a possibility to play? Or does the peer pressure keep such displays out of the playtime? Whatever the case, as "emotionality" is often connected with being female (Ragins & Winkel, 2011), non-binary or young, it is possible that these groups are left out based on their assumed undesirable emotions.

The described social conflicts also prove that bullying can be a problem within the hobby. This, given with the inherent power imbalances of *Vampire* TRPGs, could potentially make them a dangerous ground for harassment. Many gamemasters showed understanding of this danger by underlining the importance of open discussions, playing with familiar players, staying open for feedback and limiting the gamemaster's power. However, bullying isn't always visible, as Payne and Smith (2013) have pointed out, suggesting that it should be reframed

> to incorporate an understanding of the ways . . . culture encompasses systemic modes of power and oppression, particularly gendered hierarchies . . . in changing the definition from one of the bully/victim binary to one that understands gender policing and peer aggression as sustaining power imbalances we can begin to challenge heterosexist and gendered oppressions. (Payne & Smith, 2013, as quoted by Preston, 2016)

It is also important to note the importance of speaking up and having other people to speak up for you. This came up in the answers in many ways: stories of not daring to speak up, stories of getting help in a difficult situation from someone else and stories of helping others in difficult situations. Downey (2015, p.73) points this out as well, stating that allies "act as buffers for hostile behaviour" and that "it was how other players defended them when toxicity took place that they appreciated."

A few informants appeared to feel attacked by the questionnaire and the questions within it, some giving answers that were clearly meant as jokes, and some downright stating that the research was useless. While gender or the gamemaster's responsibility were not directly talked about in the questions, it seemed that some people assumed that the goal of the research was to blame the GMs on their style of play, writing defensive statements about their straightness and

stating that players need to learn that everyone is responsible for their own safety. And while it could be assumed that these reactions would rise from people who ignore the safety of their players, this was not true.

This reaction is also noted in other studies about gender and safety: Dyszelski (2006) describes many angry reactions to the research of sexism within gaming, as well as frustrated reactions to the industry's attempts at being more inclusive. Kyllönen et al. (2020) also bring up the same issue, stating that some people seemed to view safety mechanics as a sort of punishment or restriction that was being applied to their hobby.

All this said, while it is easy to criticize gamemasters on their practises, it is important to note that TRPGs are usually played as a hobby, with limited time, resources and expertise, within groups of friends that are already familiar with each other. Although this does not render any critique irrelevant, these findings should be seen as part of the broader culture that they are set in. Playing with dark themes, embracing the porousness of the magic circle or regulating access to one's game groups are not toxic or harmful practises as such. As Downey (2015, p.19) points out, people's gaming identities are often determined as not valid based on their playstyle. However, the history of TRPGs shows us that change is possible, and that the culture of play keeps transforming as more and more people start playing. And to make sure that the change is positive, it is important to understand what our playing looks like at the moment, and to imagine ways it could be different in the future.

6 CONCLUSIONS

GMs often have the most power to really bring changes to their groups of players. However, calibrating the playstyles of all participants can be hard, and negotiating through the power hierarchies requires good social skills. The themes introduced in the game need to be ones that all participants consent to playing, and sometimes even consensual play can cause bleed or trigger anxiety.

In this research I studied the experiences of gamemasters that had run *Vampire*-tabletop RPGs in the years since it was first published. I collected a rich set of data using an online questionnaire and analysed it using thematic analysis, basing my findings on earlier studies and theories made on role-playing games.

I identified four different types of problems that the gamemasters faced: differences in creative agendas, difficult social dynamics, experiences of bleed and misunderstandings in the sharing of power. After that I presented the three solutions I had identified: calibrations of play, directing the play and aftercare/decompression. These solutions were not given as answers to any specific problems but rather as general solutions to any difficulties that could arise. Overall, good, open communication and familiarity between players were underlined as the most important factors for a safe, enjoyable game.

While I did not set a hypothesis for the research, my assumption at the start of this research, based on the discourse I was seeing online, was that the tabletop role-playing community would still be very inexperienced in the area of safety and communication, and that gamemasters might not have any techniques for handling difficulties. In many of the media I followed, a common idea seemed to be that if a player cannot handle the game by themselves, they should quit playing altogether. However, I recognise that my assumptions rose very heavily from the international TRPG scene instead of the local one, and that the discussions that made it to my feed were probably the most radical ones. I was happy to see that my research proved many of my assumptions to be incorrect.

The data was very diverse and wide, and while this meant I had a lot of ground to work with, it also meant that many interesting elements had to be left out from the final work. As an example, people often referenced their experiences in other people's games, bringing up difficulties they had faced as players. There were also interesting examples of changes in the

culture over the years, interesting differences in the ways people understood power, and a wide array of skills and traditions that came up when people spoke of what makes a good gamemaster. These issues are worth more research, and if I continue doing studies based on this data, they could be some of the directions those studies could go for.

While the sample of this research is small, and it has limitations that should be considered, these findings do illustrate the experiences of gamemasters as well as general discourses around issues of safety. Gamemaster practises are still a rather under-researched topic, and the themes identified here can be used as a base for further studies on the topic. These results can also prove useful to those designing and writing TRPGs in the future.

6.1 Afterword

The reason I chose this topic to begin with was my experiences of bleed and triggering content in TRPGs. When I describe my experiences of bleed to other role-players, I have sometimes come across the idea that my gamemaster must have failed. However, playing for bleed is something that I enjoy. The problem, for me, arises when I want to find help for dealing with the feelings or discuss their meanings to me.

In LARP circles the phenomena of bleed is so well known that I can get support from people that know nothing about the particular game I played in. Within the tabletop scene this support doesn't exist yet, and the public spaces like Facebook groups do not feel safe to discuss such vulnerable issues. My wish has been to contribute to the safety of my hobby in some way. While studying players might have given a more appropriate picture on the occurrence of bleed or experiences of uncomfortable play practices, I felt that concentrating on the GMs would offer a broader understanding on how the problems are actually handled and therefore give new tools for enabling change within the hobby.

I do not think that playing with taboos is a bad thing, nor that all game groups should adapt some specific methods to their play. Sometimes playing dark games might not be difficult at all. However, I want this hobby to stay inclusive to all players, including those who do not wish to engage in dark play, as well as those who want to dive deep into bleed, or those that play just for the fun. I also want that players and gamemasters alike understand the possible pitfalls of tabletop role-playing, so that if and when issues arise, the participants are equipped with tools to handle them.

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8 APPENDICES

Appendix 1 - The Questionnaire

Translated by the researcher from Finnish to English

Gamemastering *Vampire* role-playing games

A research on gamemastering *Vampire* role-playing games.

Have you ever run one of White Wolf's or Modiphius Entertainment's *Vampire*-series tabletop role-playing games, such as *Vampire the Masquera*de or *Vampire the Requiem*?

If your answer is yes, you are exactly the target group of this research.

Due to the small number of people in this hobby, it would be very important to me to have exactly your answer!

The questions are about your experiences being a gamemaster in a Vampire tabletop roleplaying game – there are no wrong or right answers. Please answer each question carefully. You should reserve around 30 minutes to answering. If needed, you can also save your answers and continue later on – however, it is recommended to answer all questions in one go.

Ps. Please note that live action games have been purposefully cropped out of this study.

The questionnaire is a part of a master's thesis research, done for Aalto University's Game Design and Production line. The research is conducted by Mirka Oinonen.

The collected data can later also be used to other possible publications based on this research. The collected information will be stored according to appropriate information security protocols until the thesis is evaluated, and the direct answers will only be handled by the researcher themselves. If necessary, anonymized data can also be seen by the supervisor and advisors of the research.

If you have any questions regarding the research or the usage of the information, please contact

mirka.oinonen@aalto.fi

1. How many years have you gamemastered tabletop RPGs? (any TRPG games count!)

2. What *Vampire* games have you gamemastered? (multiple-choice)

3. Have you gamemastered other tabletop RPGs? If yes, what?

4. When was the last time you gamemastered a Vampire tabletop RPG?

5. What kind of game groups do you usually run Vampire games for? (are your players, for example, familiar/unfamiliar, a certain age, certain gender, enjoy a certain game style…)

6. On a scale from 1-5, how often have you faced the following situations when gamemastering? (1=never, 2=rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=often, 5=almost always, 0= I can't say)

    a) I have negotiated a game's content with a player/players before the game

    b) I have unpacked / debriefed the game's event with a player/players after the game

    c) I have taken a player's character under my control without their permission

    d) I have run scenes, where a player's character dies

    e) I have run scenes that include physical violence

    f) I have run scenes that include mental/psychological violence

    g) I have run scenes that include sexual violence

    h) I have run themes that include sex or sexual themes

    i) I have run a game where the content made me uncomfortable

    j) I have run a game where the content was uncomfortable for the players

    k) I have stopped running a game because of the game's themes

    l) A player has stopped playing because of the themes of the game

    m) I sometimes change my plans according to a player's wishes

7. On a scale from 1-5, how much do you agree with the following claims? (1= completely disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=do not agree or disagree, 4=somewhat agree, 5= completely agree, 0= I can't say)

    a) My players can communicate what kind of a game they want to play

    b) I want to shock my players with the game's themes

c) Playing is smoother if all information about the content of the session is open for everyone

d) Serious themes work best if they come as a surprise for the players

e) I want to make my player's characters face difficult questions

f) I want to make the players feel powerful emotions

8. How often do you include the following themes to your games? (1= never, 2=rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=often)

    a) Fighting

    b) Drinking blood / making someone drink blood

    c) Religion

    d) Politics

    e) Backstabbing

    f) Torture

    g) War

    h) Horror

    i) Sex

    j) Romance

    k) Alcohol or drugs

    l) Discrimination

    m) Mental health

    n) Use of power / authority

9. What kind of goals do you have in your gamemastering? Do you strive for example to stay strictly within the rules, go for a certain atmosphere, a certain playstyle etc?

10. Do you write surprising or shocking situations to your games? How do you handle these situations?

11. In your games, how is the authority about the game's content shared? (for example, who decides how to interpret the rules, what kind of rights do players have on creating content, who decides the game's mood or direction, who controls the NPCs?)

12. What kind of skills do you need while gamemastering? Are there some skills you feel you're especially good at?

13. What things affect your gamemastering style?

14. Tell about the most challenging experiences you have had as a gamemaster. How did these situations happen and how were they handled?

15. Are there any themes you could not include in your game? If yes, tell what themes you would not want to include and why. If not, tell why.

16. If the players ask you to run some theme, how do you act? Does it matter if you yourself feel the theme is challenging or distressing?

17. Have you noticed some certain themes that would make the players uncomfortable? If yes, what themes have been like this?

18. Have you encountered situations, where the events that happened during the game would have bothered the players after the game? If yes, describe the situation and how you acted during it.

19. Have the events during a game affected your player's mood, relationships or actions after the game? How?

20. Do you somehow prepare your players for the game sessions? How and why?

21. Do you go through the game's events with your players after the game ends? If yes, how and why?

22. Imagine you are starting a game with a plot that includes some tragic or distressing situations (e.g. an NPC character's suicide, an NPC that has experienced sexual violence). Describe how you prepare for the session and how you start running it with the players.

23. Imagine that one of your players tells you that playing in your game has turned too heavy for them. Describe how you would act in the situation.

24. Imagine that one of your players tells you they are worrying about their character's fate. Describe how you would act in the situation.

25. Imagine that two of your players end up in a fight because of things their characters have done. Describe how you would act in the situation.

26. Think back to the games you have run and the players you have encountered. If possible, describe some social situation connected to a game that has been challenging to deal with.

27. Have you noticed players having different attitudes to campaign characters than to one-shot characters? If yes, describe the differences.

28. Does the campaign's length or intensity affect your style of running a game? If yes, describe how.

29. Do you think there is a player type or a group of people that Vampire-games aren't suited for? Why or why not?

30. Have you used mechanics that allow the players to stop the game, change it's mood or move to the next scene (e.g. x-card, veiling)? How have these mechanics worked in your opinion?

31. How do you decide on out-of-game issues, such as the location, schedule, breaks, eating or other practicalities in your game group?

32. Do you search for information or advice on gamemastering somewhere? If yes, where?

33. If you have any thoughts or experiences on other TRPGs than Vampire games, you can share them here if you wish to!

34. Year of birth (multiple-choice)

35. Gender (open question)

36. Highest education level (multiple-choice)

37. Do you want to be contacted for a possible extra interview? The interviews can be conducted, for example, live, over video call (e.g. Skype or Discord) or via email. We need an email to contact you. The interviews will be conducted over the winter of 2019 and spring of 2020.

    a) Yes/no

38. Contact information (necessary, if you wish to be a part of the interviews)

39. Other observations or feedback on the questionnaire

Thank you for answering!

If you have any questions about the research, contact me via mirka.oinonen@aalto.fi

Mirka Oinonen

Game Design and Production (Master of Arts)

Aalto Yliopisto

Appendix 2 - The informants

Informant number	Born in	Has gamemastered TRPGs for (years)	Gamemastered *Vampire* games last in	Gender
1	1976	31-35	2001-2005	man
2	1975	31-35	2016-2019	man
3	1991	1-5	2016-2019	man
4	1981	16-20	2011-2015	not binary
5	1979	31-35	2016-2019	man
6	1984	21-25	2011-2015	man
7	1981	1-5	2016-2019	woman
8	1961	31-35	1991-1995	man
9	1974	11-15	2001-2005	man
10	1977	31-35	2016-2019	man
11	1980	26-30	2016-2019	not binary
12	1971	26-30	2006-2010	man
13	1985	21-25	2016-2019	man
14	1980	26-30	2016-2019	man
15	1987	6-10	2016-2019	man
16	1984	11-15	2016-2019	not binary
17	1980	21-25	2016-2019	woman

18	1980	26-30	2016-2019	man
19	1980	21-25	2011-2015	man
20	1982	11-15	2016-2019	man
21	1975	1-5	2016-2019	man
22	1976	21-25	2016-2019	-
23	1988	11-15	2016-2019	man
24	1975	36-40	2016-2019	man
25	1978	31-35	2006-2010	-
26	-	31-35	2016-2019	not binary
27	1983	16-20	2001-2005	man
28	1987	16-20	2001-2005	man
29	1990	1-5	2011-2015	woman
30	1974	26-30	2006-2010	not binary
31	1980	11-15	2016-2019	attack helicopter
32	1979	26-30	2016-2019	man
33	1978	16-20	2011-2015	man
34	1974	11-15	2006-2010	man
35	1989	6-10	2006-2010	man
36	1982	26-30	2016-2019	man
37	1989	11-15	2011-2015	man
38	1982	16-20	2016-2019	man

39	1979	16-20	2006-2010	woman
40	1980	26-30	2006-2010	not binary
41	1995	1-5	2016-2019	-